



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**THE ROLES OF DECISION MAKERS IN SPECIAL  
OPERATIONS**

by

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December 2016

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**THE ROLES OF DECISION MAKERS IN SPECIAL OPERATIONS**

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requirements for the degree of

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the roles of decision makers in three phases of a special operation: the approval phase, the preparation phase, and the execution phase. The author argues that the level of decision makers' involvement should be high in the approval phase, medium in the preparation phase, and low in the execution phase. Four special operations—Operation Thunderbolt, Operation Nimrod, Operation Eagle Claw, and the Moscow Theater Hostage Crisis—which were conducted by different countries' Special Forces, are studied in order to test the argument. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to draw attention to the specific roles that decision makers should perform for a successful special operation. It concludes by offering these specific activities for decision makers: Examining Less Risky Options, Gaining International and Domestic Support, Delegating Authority, Establishing Clear Chain of Command, Selecting Appropriate Units, Gaining Time, Coordinating, and Preserving Secrecy.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ARSOF	Army Special Operation Forces
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COBRA	Cabinet Office Briefing Room
Delta Force	1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta
FSB	Federal Security Service
MI5	Military Intelligence, Section 5
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO	The Palestine Liberation Organization
SAS	Special Air Service
SOF	Special Operation Forces
Spetsnaz	Russian Special Forces Unit
The Unit	Sayeret Matkal
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **A. INTRODUCING THE STUDY**

Today's complex, rapidly changing, and uncertain security environment has expanded the Special Forces' role in solving complex problems. Government leadership is eager to use Special Operations Forces (SOF) to respond to these complex problems. Numerous reasons justify using SOF to address internal and external challenges: economy of force, highly trained personnel, and the flexibility of SOF units. Thus, SOF's increasing importance requires a deep understanding of the capabilities and limitations of special operations and the factors required for proper SOF application.

Understanding the level of intervention and conducting special operations correctly are crucially important for those who will authorize a special operation to solve an ongoing crisis. Likewise, understanding the appropriate role of senior decision makers for SOF application will be beneficial for them to manage the process efficiently. In this respect, the wrong level of decision-maker involvement while conducting special operations may cause undesirable consequences, which might damage a nation's prestige, lose high-value special operations forces' personnel and civilian lives, and produce more serious problems than before.

This research examines the roles and activities of decision makers by focusing on the level of the decision maker's involvement during three phases of special operations: approval, preparation, and execution.

### **B. PURPOSE AND SCOPE**

The purpose of the research is to present a clear understanding of senior decision makers' level of involvement and to clearly identify the roles and responsibilities of senior decision makers when managing special operations that are short-duration direct actions. Four cases are selected for analysis based on the availability of resources necessary for research.

### **C. RESEARCH QUESTION**

What is the appropriate level of control and involvement of senior-level decision makers during the approval, preparation, and execution phases of a special operation? To answer this question, the hypotheses that resulted from examining the existing literature are tested across the case studies. The verified roles identified in the case studies are intended to guide senior decision makers when they are directing the process of conducting a special operation.

### **D. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature that sheds light on the research question focuses on special operations, special operation forces, and strategy related to special operations. Significant academic works cover these subjects which may be subdivided into three main categories: theory of special operations and SOF' roles and missions, the growing importance of SOF in modern warfare, and the strategic utility of SOF. However, the literature related to the level of involvement and the roles of senior decision makers in special operations is limited and the topic is rarely discussed in existing resources.

The first group of academic publications relates to the theory of special operations and SOF roles and missions. In this group, William H. McRaven's work<sup>1</sup> comes to the forefront. McRaven's theory exclusively treats direct action missions; these types of missions are now referred to as surgical strikes according to ARSOF-I 2022.<sup>2</sup> McRaven presents six principles for surgical strike special operations in order to achieve relative superiority and conduct successful special operation missions. These principles address planners and practitioners of special operations and guide them in preparation and executing special operations. For senior level civilian and military leaders, McRaven's

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<sup>1</sup> William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Army Special Operation Command, "ARSOF 2022 PART I," *Special Warfare* 26, no. 2 (June 2013).

work helps them to understand surgical strike special operations, but provides limited perspective to unravel the use of special operations beyond commando raids.

Some scholars also focus on the broad principles that cover all types of special operations. Christopher Lamb's work provides a broader understanding about SOF roles and missions. Lamb suggests three factors to assess SOF roles. These factors are the nature of the threats, the security environment we anticipate in the future, and the national security strategy to deal with these threats and the nature of the forces.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Lamb writes about four characteristics of special operations in order to understand whether a mission is a special operation or not. Furthermore, Lamb warns about the misuse of SOF by presenting the risks of inappropriate SOF missions. He asserts that inappropriate missions cause SOF to become more like conventional forces, and they may lose their unconventional character. Lamb's work provides some valuable information for decision makers to assess whether a mission is special operation and is suitable for SOF.

The second group of scholars' works is about the growing importance of SOF in modern warfare. The academics in this group attempt to explain to decision makers the increasing importance of SOF from various perspectives. In this respect, Edward N. Luttwak claims that as the intensity of the war declines, the opponents become hard to define because they are dispersed.<sup>4</sup> Low intensity warfare requires the following: flexible doctrine and units; cultural awareness; language ability; autonomous structure. Conventional forces are not appropriate to deal with low intensity threats, but SOF units are. Similarly, Colin Gray describes SOF as an innovation to address low intensity conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Although understanding the growing importance of SOF by civilian and military decision makers makes them more interested in using SOF and to conduct

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. Lamb, "Perspectives on Emerging SOF Roles and Missions," *Special Warfare* 8 (July 1995): 2.

<sup>4</sup> Edward N. Luttwak, "Notes on Low-Intensity Warfare," *Parameters* 13, no. 4 (December 1983): 14.

<sup>5</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 273.

special operations, it does not mean that they are competent on how to properly execute such operation.

The last group of scholars addresses the strategic value of SOF. This literature is directed toward decision makers. David Tucker and Christopher Lamb also contribute significantly to this literature. Their primary argument is that civilian and military decision makers need to realize the strategic value of special operation forces and special operations. In order to grasp the true strategic value of SOF for a nation, leaders should make the assessment of the security challenges to the nation.<sup>6</sup> In other words, SOF's strategic concept is associated with the national defense strategy for countering national threats. The appreciation of the strategic value of SOF should lead decision makers to prioritize missions for SOF and employ them properly. After determining the strategic value of SOF, Tucker and Lamb's advice is that "SOF units need a strategic concept that explains their value to the nation in terms of roles and missions they are prepared to conduct."<sup>7</sup> Tucker and Lamb's ideas are very useful for defining the strategic value of SOF in a broad sense, but decision makers need more detailed information to employ SOF properly and to direct special operations.

Colin Gray focuses on the factors of properly using SOF and the results of misusing SOF. He is a leading writer about strategy and special operations. As a strategist, he emphasizes the strategic utility of SOF and the factors leading to success in special operations. He underscores that the strategic utility of special operations forces relies upon the understanding of its potential by civilian and military leaders.<sup>8</sup> Besides strategic utility, Gray also draws attention to the misuse of special operation forces by stating: "The record of special operations is rife with cases in which the scarce assets of Special Forces were poorly employed."<sup>9</sup> It is obvious from Gray's writings that a first

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<sup>6</sup> David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 179.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>8</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 149.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 148.

step to employ SOF properly is to understand its strategic utility. However, it is insufficient to ensure proper use.

In another writing,<sup>10</sup> Gray examines the conditions for success and failure of special operations. He also says that it is impossible to identify all parameters that bring success and all settings that assure failure. Gray listed the following conditions, “policy demand, politics, feasible objectives, strategy, flexibility of mind, absence of alternatives, enemy vulnerabilities, technological assistance, tactical competence, reputation and history,” as beneficial for decision makers to grasp the conditions that may bring about SOF success.

Lucien S. Vandenbroucke’s book<sup>11</sup> examines the problems in the preparation and execution of U.S. strategic special operations that result in failure. Vandenbroucke identifies reasons for failure through examining four different cases. Furthermore, he offers suggestions for senior level civilian and military decision makers on how to use special operations forces properly.

The literature review recognizes numerous factors that decision makers and senior level commanders need to know to employ special operation forces properly. SOF theory has been examined from various perspectives; this thesis asserts that no practical roles or activities have been identified to guide senior level decision makers in special operations. Consequently, my hope is that the thesis will make a contribution to fill the gap between the theoretical ideas, the level of control and the roles senior decision makers should perform.

## **E. HYPOTHESES**

This thesis intends to examine the level of control exercised by senior decision makers in special operations. More specifically, the level of control and involvement of

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<sup>10</sup> Colin S. Gray, “Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?,” *Parameters* 29, no. 1 (1999): 2–24.

<sup>11</sup> Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

senior decision makers in three phases of special operations—approval, preparation and execution—are the main concern of this thesis. This thesis also aims to examine three hypotheses that are related to the functions of decision makers in the three phases of special operations.

### **1. Hypothesis 1**

The level of the decision makers' control and involvement should be high in the approval phase of a special operation. For decision makers, deciding whether to approve a special mission or not is crucially important. Considering the consequences of a high-risk special operation, the approval phase of the mission requires a high level of involvement by decision makers.

### **2. Hypothesis 2**

The level of decision makers' control and involvement should be medium in the preparation phase of a special operation. The role of senior decision makers does not end in the approval phase of a special operation; it continues in the preparation phase. SOF may need the support of the decision maker to be fully prepared for the mission. Therefore, decision makers should be ready to help SOF units to obtain all that is necessary for mission success.

### **3. Hypothesis 3**

The level of decision makers' control and involvement should be low in the execution phase of a special operation. The execution phase requires tactical knowledge. Accordingly, most decisions should be left to subordinate leaders. If decision makers intervene in the execution phase, this could hamper SOF's ability to accomplish the mission, lower the chance of success, and bring unwanted consequences.

## **F. APPROACH**

As stated previously, the aim of this thesis is to determine the appropriate level of senior decision maker involvement in special operations that are short-duration direct actions. The case studies are analyzed to gather information to test the hypotheses.

The thesis examines three hypotheses. Ultimately, this research will approve, disapprove, or modify the initial hypotheses, or produce a new hypothesis based on case analysis. Subsequently, the roles determined from the analysis may help prevent recurrent mistakes of senior decision makers and the resulting failure of a special operation. Moreover, although the theory and nature of special operations are complex, an understanding of these necessary and sufficient roles of senior decision makers will be useful to guide national leaders.

The case selection includes both successful and unsuccessful surgical strike type special operations conducted by different nations' SOF. The first criterion for selection is that senior decision makers took part in the approval, preparation, or execution phases of the mission. In this respect, the role of senior decision makers in each chosen case will be examined based on the hypotheses and identified principles. The second criterion is selecting cases that reflect future threats. Thus, the principles identified might be beneficial to senior decision makers from all nations. The third criterion requires that the cases selected have been documented in the literature. The last criterion is that the cases chosen from among the special operations have been conducted in the time period after World War II.

According to the above criteria, four cases have been chosen for study. These cases are analyzed to specifically test the identified hypotheses. The first case is The Raid on Entebbe, which is also known as Operation Thunderbolt. Israeli special operation forces performed Operation Thunderbolt to rescue Jewish passengers of a skyjacked airplane that landed at Entebbe Airport in Uganda. The operation was mainly a success; all hijackers and many Ugandan soldiers were killed, and most of the hostages were rescued, except three who died during the mission. In this operation, Israeli decision makers participated in the process of the operation.

The Iranian Embassy Siege, or Operation Nimrod, is the second case. Six Iranian terrorists entered the Iranian Embassy in London by force and took the people in the embassy hostage in 1980. The British Special Air Service (SAS) conducted the assault to rescue the hostages. British decision makers were actively involved in the approval and preparation phases of the mission.

The Iran Hostage Rescue Mission, which is also dubbed Operation Eagle Claw, is the third case. Operation Eagle Claw is an instructive historical example of special operations because of its convoluted nature and failure. U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who initiated the rescue, was an active figure the process of the operation. Additionally, many different units of the United States Armed Forces were used in the operation, which illustrates the complex nature of the operation and makes it a valuable case to view the roles of senior decision makers.

The Dubrovka Music Theater Crisis (or Nord-Ost Seige) in Moscow is the fourth case. In 2002, Chechen rebels captured the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow and took hostages. Russian special operation forces, Spetsnaz, carried out a rescue operation by pumping an unknown chemical gas into the theater's ventilation system then entering the theater. The result of the mission was tragic; hundreds of hostages were killed by toxic gas, not by bullets.

After a brief summary of the conditions of each mission, the cases are divided into five sections which include the following: the "political-military situation" provides information about the situation before the crisis; the "concept of the operation and roles of decision makers" provide detailed information about how the decision makers behaved during the approval and preparation phases of the operation; the "mission execution and results" summarize the execution and results of the mission and provides information about how senior decision makers acted in the execution phase of the operation; the "assessment of the roles of decision makers" analyzes the roles of decision makers; and the "conclusion" evaluates the merits of case and their bearing on the research question and hypotheses.



## **II. CASE STUDIES**

### **A. OPERATION THUNDERBOLT (THE RAID ON ENTEBBE)**

The Israeli Special Forces' hostage rescue operation at Entebbe Airport in Uganda remains one of the most daring special operations in history. Accordingly, examining the role of the decision makers in the operation can provide valuable insights. The rescue operation at Entebbe serves as a great example of effective decision maker involvement in the approval, preparation, and execution phases of a special operation.

#### **1. Political-Military Situation**

Operation Entebbe, which is also known as Operation Thunderbolt, was a counterterrorist hostage-rescue mission conducted by Israeli commandos in Uganda at Entebbe Airport on July 4, 1976. Before the incident, tensions between Israel and Palestinians were high.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) were the two leading factions fighting against Israel in order to establish a free Palestine. In the 1960s and 1970s, both factions knew that they could not fight against superior Israeli forces. As a result, they began to hijack planes to get the attention of the international community and the Israeli authorities as well. The PFLP leadership, in particular, favored hijacking as a terrorist action.<sup>12</sup> Other Palestinian groups, such as Black September, began to use the same type of terrorist tactic.<sup>13</sup>

Since 1968, the Israeli government had dealt with the hijackings and other kinds of terrorist actions. The Israeli government's reactions to all terrorist attacks were the same: reject any negotiation with terrorists. Before the Air France hijacking incident, the Israeli government responded to similar events with actions to rescue hostages.

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<sup>12</sup> Saul David, *Operation Thunderbolt: Flight 139 and the Raid on Entebbe Airport, the Most Audacious Hostage Rescue Mission in History*, First North American edition (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 12.

## 2. Concept of Operation and Roles of Decision Makers

On June 27, 1976, four terrorists hijacked an Air France plane and its passengers. Two of the hijackers belonged to the PFLP External Operations; the other two were German terrorists who were members of the Revolutionary Cell.<sup>14</sup> The route of the plane was from Israel to Paris. Terrorists took control by using handguns and hand grenades and directed the plane to the Entebbe Airport in Uganda. In Uganda, additional Palestinians joined the hostage takers; some units of the Ugandan Army also helped the hostage takers move the Israeli hostages from the plane into the building called the old terminal. On June 29, the terrorists announced their demands to the Israeli government. They wanted Israel to free 40 Palestinian prisoners and another 13 prisoners in four different countries: West Germany, Kenya, Switzerland, and France.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, they stated that if the Israeli government did not meet their demands, they would begin to kill hostages on July 1.

As soon as the Israeli government learned about the incident, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin organized a crisis management team consisting of Minister of Defense Shimon Peres, Justice Minister Haim Zadok, Foreign Minister Yigal Allon, Transportation Minister Gad Yaakobi, Minister without portfolio Yisrael Galili, Chief of Staff Motta Gur, and himself.<sup>16</sup> Also, Israeli authorities directed a negotiation team to begin diplomatic contact with all the other governments related to the demands of the hostage takers.<sup>17</sup> Another immediate step that the Israeli decision makers took was to alert the Sayeret Matkal, the Israeli counterterrorist unit, referred to as “the Unit.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>15</sup> Chaim Herzog, “The War Against Terrorism: Entebbe,” in *From Troy to Entebbe: Special Operations in Ancient and Modern Times*, ed. John Arquilla (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), 335.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Dunstan, *Israel’s Lightning Strike: The Raid on Entebbe, 1976* (Oxford: Osprey, 2009), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Zeev Maoz, “The Decision to Raid Entebbe: Decision Analysis Applied to Crisis Behavior,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25, no. 4 (1981): 688.

<sup>18</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare*, 333.

Israeli decision makers came together in numerous sessions to discuss viable options to resolve the hostage crisis. Israeli decision makers had different opinions about the solutions. Prime Minister Rabin was not comfortable with military solution for various reasons. His biggest concern was the lives of the hostages. Rabin's other consideration was that a failed rescue mission with huge number of casualties would result in Israel's loss of influence and friends. Failure would also end Rabin's political career. Therefore, he was almost ready to accept the ultimatum of the terrorists.<sup>19</sup> Rabin's attitude remained unchanged, since there was still no reasonable military option. Just before July 1, Rabin advised the cabinet to submit to the demands of the terrorists and begin negotiations to save the hostages and bring them home alive. The cabinet members' biggest concern was that by giving in to terrorist demands, they would encourage more terrorism against the Israeli people. The cabinet reluctantly approved the negotiation, but also approved, under pressure from Peres, efforts to continue to search for a feasible military option.<sup>20</sup>

Shimon Peres, the Minister of Defense, opposed the negotiation from the very beginning. He persistently stressed that the Israeli government should reject the demands of the terrorists in order to deter terrorism in the future. However, he realized that other options had a very low probability of saving the hostages. Peres strongly believed that any solution other than negotiation would bring a better outcome in the future. He supported negotiations in order to gain time to come up with a military plan with acceptable risk. Therefore, he ordered the Israeli Chief of Staff, General Motta Gur, to find a military solution on the first day of the incident.<sup>21</sup>

As a senior military decision maker, Israeli Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Gur, supported a military option only if the risks were reasonable. Already he had ordered his staff and Israeli special forces to work on possible military options before

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<sup>19</sup> Herzog, "The War Against Terrorism: Entebbe," 336.

<sup>20</sup> Tony Williamson, *Counterstrike Entebbe* (London: Harper Collins, 1976), 26.

<sup>21</sup> Herzog, "The War Against Terrorism: Entebbe," 336.

joining the meetings with Israeli civilian decision makers. Major General Dan Shomron was in charge of reviewing military options. The planners of the operation left no stone unturned in gathering intelligence to shape the plan. With photographs of the Entebbe airport, the planners developed several military options. With little information, the planners ordered, the task force to rehearse the available options; the results were discouraging.<sup>22</sup>

The terrorists changed the deadline to July 4, after the Israeli government announced that it would begin negotiations with the terrorists to release the prisoners. Even though Rabin's initial intention was not to buy time for the military option, the negotiations gained more time for the task force. Furthermore, the terrorists released all non-Israeli hostages and segregated Israeli hostages. This made the incident the Israeli government's problem alone.

The segregation of Israeli hostages made the Israeli government more cautious about the negotiations. Ugandan President Idi Amin acted as the negotiator for the PFLP terrorists. However, the continuing negotiations with the Ugandan President revealed that he was working with the terrorists. As Amin's support of the hijackers became clear, the Israeli decision makers considered replacing him with the United Nations Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim. But Amin would resist this attempt. The PFLP had already refused any United Nations intervention in the negotiation process.

As the negotiations proceeded, Israeli decision makers realized that there was as much risk in the negotiation process as in the rescue mission. The Israeli government hesitated to accept the demands of the terrorists, since the government believed that there would be new demands to release the hostages. Thus, the Israeli decision makers became more inclined towards a military solution. The minister of Defense, Peres, ordered the chief of staff to work harder on a military operation. The task force was already working on several options. With the invaluable intelligence gathered from the released hostages, the task force finalized the rescue plan. General Shomron briefed the chief of staff and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 335.

other high level commanders in the Israeli Armed Forces on the plan. Shomron had made all necessary coordination with the Israeli Air Force, Intelligence, and medical units.<sup>23</sup>

In the meantime, the chief of staff and the minister of defense accepted the detailed plan that General Shomron presented. Peres, the Minister of Defense, called Prime Minister Rabin and said they were ready to brief a reasonable military plan. Rabin approved the plan, subject to the approval of the cabinet. The cabinet approved the rescue plan; the task force then took off from Israel route to the Entebbe Airport.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, Israeli decision makers continued negotiations with Ugandan authorities in order to preserve the secrecy of the rescue operation. Other senior military and civilian decision makers also acted to preserve secrecy of the operation. For instance, General Gur's father-in-law had died; he attended the funeral to give the appearance that a military rescue mission was not contemplated.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, ministers continued with their routine official receptions and other duties.

Senior Israeli decision makers continuously intervened in the preparation process. For instance, the tactical planners experienced several problems with senior level military decision makers. The tactical commander of the rescue force was Yoni Netanyahu, who was killed during the operation. The chief of staff, Motta Gur, intervened several times to make tactical adjustments to the plan.<sup>26</sup> Netanyahu shared his considerations with Gur, but Gur insisted on the changes that he ordered.

General Shomron also intervened in the preparation phase, which was normal because his role was to manage the rescue plan. Though he would not participate in the tactical execution phase of the operation, he suggested using a larger force to control the Entebbe Airfield. Netanyahu and other tactical-level officers preferred using a smaller

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>25</sup> Williamson, *Counterstrike Entebbe*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> David, *Operation Thunderbolt*, 253.

and more mobile force.<sup>27</sup> Shomron did not insist on his modification to the plan and left the final decision to the tactical commanders. Netanyahu and the other officers were happy that Shomron accepted the tactical commander's position.

The Israeli decision makers chose the best military unit in the Israeli Armed Forces, the Sayeret Matkal. Netanyahu, the commander of the Sayeret Matkal, also selected the best personnel. He picked the soldiers based on their combat experience and seniority. During the operation, the competence of the Sayeret Matkal soldiers was clearly evident. Although they had less than two days of preparation for the mission, the execution of the operation was almost flawless.

### **3. Mission Execution and Results**

Operation Thunderbolt is one of the most famous and universally studied hostage rescue operations in history. The operation was a great success, since the hostages were rescued with few casualties while killing all the terrorists. The task force of the operation consisted of 100 highly trained Israeli commandos with battle experience.<sup>28</sup>

The operation began on the night of July 4. The first plane landed, as planned, following the British cargo plane without causing suspicion to the Ugandan forces in the control tower. This was crucially important for the success of the operation. The rescue force reached the old terminal and killed all the terrorists while engaging Ugandan forces. The terrorists were caught by surprise. In the meantime, the second, third, and fourth Israeli airplanes landed at the airport as planned. The forces in the other planes secured the whole airport and made ready for evacuation of the hostages. As the Israeli Special Forces withdrew with the hostages, they destroyed 11 Ugandan MiG-17 fighter planes to prevent pursuit of the Israeli airplanes.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare*, 338.

<sup>28</sup> Herzog, "The War Against Terrorism: Entebbe," 338.

<sup>29</sup> Chaitanya Arun Sathe, "A Case Study on Crisis Management with a Specific Reference to Operation Thunderbolt Executed by Israeli Defense Forces," *SIBM Pune Research Journal X* (December 2015): 49.

General Shomron was with the task force during the rescue operation. He stayed with his headquarters as the guard unit and left with the last plane. It was a rare occasion that a senior level military commander moved with the rescue force.

Operation Thunderbolt lasted 90 minutes from the landing in Entebbe until the last airplane took off. At the end of the operation, three of the hostages died because of the crossfire; one woman, who was in hospital, was never found. One of the task force soldiers had been killed in action.<sup>30</sup> The rescue force killed 35 Ugandan soldiers and 13 terrorists.<sup>31</sup>

#### **4. Assessment of the Roles of Decision Makers**

This assessment is based on this case study, and the decision makers' roles in the three phases of a special operation: approval, preparation, and execution.

##### ***a. In the Approval Phase***

The roles of decision makers in the approval phase of Operation Entebbe were significant. Israeli decision makers behaved based on their concerns and thoughts, and made moves to ensure the best solution for the crisis during the approval phase of the operation. Operation Thunderbolt was a risky operation. At first, Prime Minister Rabin was very anxious and against a military option because of the level of risk. For this reason, he wanted to try all other possible solutions before deciding on a rescue operation. Rabin tried peaceful options first. He tried to put pressure on Idi Amin to help convince the terrorists to release the hostages through negotiations. After 48 hours, he convinced the cabinet to unanimously approve negotiations with the terrorists to free the hostages. Later on, the military decision makers developed with a detailed plan with acceptable risk. Prime Minister Rabin approved the plan and sent it to the cabinet. Rabin acted responsibly and examined the other options before approving the rescue operation, which was still a risky choice. In other words, Israeli government officials and defense

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>31</sup> Herzog, "The War Against Terrorism: Entebbe," 342.

forces personnel accepted the risk and dealt with the pressure of the crisis after making the best decision. Operation Thunderbolt shows the senior Israeli decision makers acted properly before deciding to conduct a dangerous surgical strike operation.

During the hostage crisis, the Israeli decision makers made several attempts to put international pressure on Idi Amin to encourage him to help free the hostages by talking to PFLP terrorists. The Israeli government contacted Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to convince the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, to intercede.<sup>32</sup> After being sure that Amin was helping the terrorists based on the intelligence gathered from the interrogations of the released hostages, the Israeli decision makers stopped trying to put pressure on him. Meanwhile, government officials talked with the impatient relatives of the hostages to assure them the Israeli government was doing its best to end the crisis.

Israeli Minister of Defense Peres was very strong-minded about neither negotiating with terrorists nor accepting their demands. He persistently advised the prime minister to reject all demands of the terrorists. Peres wanted to send a message to the terrorists that the Israeli government would never agree to what they wanted in order to deter future terrorist actions. He also wanted to send a message to the international community that there is a way to fight terrorists without acceding to their demands. Furthermore, Israeli decision makers sent a message to the Israeli people that the Israeli government cares about its citizens and will do what is necessary to save them, even outside of the Israeli borders. Consequently, Operation Thunderbolt is a good example of the important role of decision makers in sending messages to both the domestic and international communities. The successful rescue mission showed the world that there is a way to fight terrorists regardless of the circumstances.

Prime Minister Rabin was clear about the consequences of failure of the rescue operation. It would mean that he would have to resign. According to the existing literature, Rabin was willing to sacrifice his political career. It is a good example of a

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<sup>32</sup> David, *Operation Thunderbolt*, 159.



politician and senior decision maker caring for his country's citizens more than for his political future. Rabin preferred negotiations to release the hostages but ultimately accepted huge personal risk by approving the rescue operation.

***b. In the Preparation Phase***

First, Israeli decision makers chose the right units to conduct the operation. The task force consisted of the best trained and experienced soldiers who were members of the counterterrorist and commando units. Additionally, the Air Force pilots who took part in the operation were among the most experienced pilots. The detailed plan, smooth execution, and the result of the operation serve as proof of the task force's proficiency. They killed all the terrorists, and lost one of their men and three hostages.

Second, Israeli decision makers continued negotiations to buy more time for the preparation of the operation. In Operation Thunderbolt, the decision makers initially began the diplomatic negotiations with the Ugandan authorities and other countries where the prisoners were held in order to understand the positions of these authorities on the matter. Because of the fact that the chief of staff could not quickly come up with a reasonable military plan, the Israeli Prime Minister asked the cabinet to approve negotiations with the terrorists. In fact, Rabin did not seek to gain time for a better plan; he was ready to accept the demands of the terrorists for the release of the prisoners, since Israel could not get all the people the terrorist wanted released. Other countries may not care about the terrorist demands because their citizens were not in Entebbe. Peres thought that a couple more days would be very beneficial to develop a better rescue plan. The time gained by this move helped the planners. They received crucial intelligence from the released hostages. With this intelligence, planners reduced the level of risk from high to acceptable, and finalized the plan within the time that the negotiations took place. After approving the rescue plan, the Israeli decision makers continued the negotiations to gain more time and create surprise during the rescue operation.

Third, during the crisis, the decision makers competently coordinated all key aspects of the decision-making process. The agencies involved included the Defense Ministry, Israeli Armed Forces, and the Israeli Intelligence Agency, Mossad. In the

preparation phase, the military decision makers reached all other agencies and units in order to create a better plan with less risk. Mossad had responded to the intelligence needs of Israeli Special Forces and the Israeli Government. The task force organized a specialized medical unit to provide immediate treatment for the possible wounded personnel and hostages by coordinating with medical units.

In the preparation and the execution phase, the Israeli decision makers behaved responsibly to preserve the secrecy of the rescue mission. General Gur went to the funeral of his father-in-law; some of ministers participated in routine receptions. Their actions helped to conceal the rescue plan.

*c. In the Execution Phase*

Senior level Israeli decision makers' roles during the execution phase of the operation were minimal. The tactical commander was the one responsible for the execution. However, one of the senior military decision makers, General Shomron, moved with the task force to Entebbe and was the last man to leave the scene, a rare occurrence in such operations. General Shomron was there in case anything unexpected came up. He did not intervene during the tactical assault; he just reported to Tel-Aviv to keep them updated on the progress of the operation. Therefore, General Shomron's presence was negligible during the tactical phase of the operation.

**5. Conclusion**

Operation Thunderbolt is a valuable case to examine the roles of decision makers in a crisis situation that require a special operation as a solution. In the approval, preparation, and execution phases, Israeli civilian and military decision makers provide good examples for future decision makers. Consequently, examining the roles of Israeli decision makers during the crisis helps to better understand the subject of this thesis.

**B. OPERATION NIMROD**

Operation Nimrod was a special operation conducted by the British Special Forces unit: Special Air Service (SAS) in London at the Iranian Embassy on May 5, 1980. Operation Nimrod is one of the most successful special operations in SOF history.

Examining the roles of senior British decision makers during the operation can provide a better understanding of the topic of the thesis.

## **1. Political-Military Situation**

Khuzestan is an oil-rich region in southwestern Iran which is highly populated with Arabs who are culturally and ethnically different from the Persians. The inhabitants of the region also call it “Arabistan.” Khuzestan is the primary source of the Iran’s wealth and power because of its oil resources. The region is very important for Iran; Iran would be a powerless country in the Middle East without Khuzestan’s oil.<sup>33</sup>

Khuzestan was autonomous under Arab Sheiks until the Shah suppressed their rights and put Persian rulers in power. The Shah altered the status of the region to a province and changed the name from Arabistan to Khuzestan.<sup>34</sup> The Khuzestanis rebelled several times to re-gain a self-rule. The Shah severely repressed these uprisings. During the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Khuzestanis went on strike and stopped the oil flow from the region to help topple the autocratic Shah regime. After the Islamic Revolution, the Khuzestanis expected to regain their self-rule, but the new regime also destroyed the dream of Khuzestan’s autonomy. The frustrated Khuzestanis reacted violently and destroyed oil industry facilities. The violence caused significant damage to the oil industry and decreased oil exports to under a million barrels a day, which resulted in an 80 percent decline.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the deterioration of relations between Iran and Iraq had an effect upon the Khuzestan cause. President Saddam Hussein’s concern was to prevent the Iranian-inspired<sup>36</sup> Islamic fundamentalism among the Shia population of Iraq. If the new Islamic Iranian regime became strong in the region, Hussein might have faced a

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<sup>33</sup> Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins: The SAS and the Iranian Embassy Siege, 1980*, (Oxford: Osprey Pub, 2009), 15.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Harclerode, *Secret Soldiers: Special Forces in the War against Terrorism* (London: Cassell, 2000), 384.

<sup>35</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins*, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Harclerode, *Secret Soldiers*, 386.

stability problem in Iraq. Therefore, Iraq increased its support to the separatist Khuzestan movement to disturb the new Islamic Iranian regime.

The Khuzestani people were struggling to find enough support to stand against the Islamic Iranian regime. Besides Hussein, many Arab countries and the rest of the world were not aware of the Khuzestani people's problems. The members of the Democratic Revolutionary Front of the Liberation of Arabistan thought that calling the rest of the world's attention to the plight of Khuzestan was necessary to gain international support against Iran's new regime. They decided to attack the Iranian Embassy in London to showcase the Khuzestani people's difficulties to the international community, especially to other Arab communities all around the world.<sup>37</sup>

In Iran, the takeover of the U.S. embassy continued, and the Americans in the embassy were still hostages. The attack on the Iranian Embassy in London made the international community watch the new Iranian regime's response to the incident. The Iranian government condemned the seizure of the Iranian embassy but blamed Iraq, the United States, and England. The Iranian Embassy siege resulted in the alienation of the Iranian regime in the eyes of the Western public and helped to publicize the cause of the Khuzestanis.

## **2. Concept of Operation and Roles of Decision Makers**

On April 30, 1980, six Iranian Arabs from Khuzestan attacked the Iranian Embassy in London, which was located at 16 Princes Gate, and took the people in the embassy hostage. The hostages were chiefly Iranian embassy staff but also included a number of tourists and two BBC personnel who were in the embassy to pick up visas. The total number of hostages was 26.<sup>38</sup> The group identified themselves as members of the Democratic Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Arabistan, which sought independence for the oil-rich southwestern region of Iran, Khuzestan.<sup>39</sup> The leader of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins*, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 15.

hostage takers was Oan, codenamed Salim. His demands were autonomy for “Arabistan” (Khuzestan), the release of 91 Arabian detainees from Iranian prisons, and safe passage for them.<sup>40</sup> The hostage takers declared the deadline as noon on Thursday, May 1. If their demands were not met, they would blow up the embassy with the hostages inside.

As soon as the British government had become aware of the incident, the Metropolitan Police and cordoned off the area. The police were not the only force involved; the SAS was aware of the crisis from the beginning. The commander of the 22 SAS, Lieutenant Colonel Mike Rose, ordered his team to be on 24-hour standby to conduct a hostage rescue operation after receiving a call from a former SAS soldier who was working with the Metropolitan Office. Afterward, Colonel Rose tried to get confirmation from his headquarters; then, the SAS headquarters asked to obtain confirmation from the Ministry of Defense. When competent authorities failed to respond to his question with a definitive answer, he decided to go to London to conduct a preliminary reconnaissance before receiving an official order from the headquarters.<sup>41</sup> The official order came six hours later from the Minister of Defense when Colonel Rose was already on the scene.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher preferred not to directly intervene in the management of the crisis and delegated that authority to the “Home Secretary,”<sup>42</sup> William Whitelaw. With the police securing the area, Whitelaw gathered a crisis management team consisting of senior members of the Home Office, the Ministry of Defense, the Foreign Office, the Metropolitan Police, MI6, MI5, a representative of SAS—de la Billiere—and the public utilities including the gas board, the water board, and the British Airports Authority in the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBRA).<sup>43</sup> The COBRA served as the British government’s emergency committee to observe and administer the efforts to solve the evolving crisis. As a leader of the COBRA,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>41</sup> Harclerode, *Secret Soldiers*, 393.

<sup>42</sup> The Home Secretary is the Secretary of State or the minister of internal affairs.

<sup>43</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins*, 21.

Whitelaw was never autocratic; he always let people express their ideas and concerns. Before every critical decision, he brought the problem into a discussion without leaving anything in the air.<sup>44</sup>

During the crisis, Whitelaw kept in contact with the prime minister. Thatcher and Whitelaw were on the same page about the strategy that included four criteria. First, the police would continue the negotiations to end the crisis peacefully. Second, if hostage takers shot anybody without killing them, the military rescue option would be considered. Third, the SAS would get the green light to go in only if the hostage takers killed anybody. Fourth, under no circumstances would the negotiators promise to let the hostage takers out of England as free people.<sup>45</sup>

Even though Thatcher was not present in the COBRA, she laid down three principles to guide the COBRA. First, the United Kingdom's laws would be applied to the crisis even though the hostage taking event was in a foreign embassy. Second, under no circumstances would the hostage takers be allowed to leave the country as free agents. Last, the first priority would be a peaceful solution. Thatcher's priority was to not risk hostages' lives, but at the same time, she wanted to show the international community that terrorism should be defeated.<sup>46</sup>

The Iranian government's reaction to the crisis made the situation more complicated. The Iranian foreign minister acknowledged to British decision makers that Iran would not meet any of the terrorists' demands.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Iran announced that if any of the hostages were killed by terrorists, the same number of Iranian Arabs would be executed.<sup>48</sup> The foreign minister also accused the United States and the Central

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<sup>44</sup> Peter De LaBilliere, *Looking for Trouble: SAS to Gulf Command - the Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 329.

<sup>45</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 89.

<sup>47</sup> William Whitelaw, *The Whitelaw Memoirs* (London: Aurum Press, 1989), 179.

<sup>48</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins*, 22.

Intelligence Agency (CIA) of being behind the incident. The Iranian government's attitude put all responsibilities on the British authorities.

After reaching the scene, the 22 SAS Task Force members settled into a building close to the Iranian Embassy and immediately planned for an emergency rescue. In order to reduce the risk, the SAS team needed more time and intelligence. The intelligence service was trying to get intelligence about the building, hostage takers, and even the hostages. In this respect, the intelligence service gathered important information about the interior of the building from the people who recently visited the embassy and from the first released hostage. Also, the planners wanted real-time intelligence from the inside of the building. Thus, the intelligence service decided to place listening devices on walls adjacent to the embassy. The walls were too thick for planting those devices, so the agents had to thin the walls. The noise of the thinning work would need to be covered by something loud. The decision makers in the COBRA coordinated with airport authorities to make several airplanes fly at low altitudes to cover the noise of the preparations to install the listening devices.<sup>49</sup> In the meantime, the negotiation process continued to try to end the crisis peacefully while gaining time for the planners and the intelligence gathering efforts.

In the meantime, the first deadline passed without any problems. Salim, the leader of the hostage takers, released many women hostages and a BBC member who had a severe stomach condition. But, the situation inside the Iranian Embassy was getting worse day by day. In addition to the previous demands, Salim wanted three ambassadors from any Arab countries to act as negotiators in order to be able to get out of the country with his men by plane. The British decision makers did not feel comfortable with the idea of foreign diplomat mediators. The decision makers' major concern was how to control the situation if forced to use negotiators whom they could not trust. Furthermore, the new demand was not consistent with one of Thatcher's principles: do not let the terrorists escape. The next day, May 2, Salim wanted to make an announcement on the BBC and

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 25.

wanted a reporter to come and take this statement. He also insisted that the announcement be aired exactly as it was written by him. However, the BBC did not make the announcement as he wanted; they misrepresented his announcement and did not mention that the hostage takers wanted the Arab diplomats in England to negotiate with the British Government. Thus, the tension in the hostage situation rose.<sup>50</sup>

The reluctance of the British decision makers to consider working with Arab negotiators slowed the process of contacting Arab countries' embassies. At this juncture, the attitude of the British decision makers and the inaccurate statement of the BBC made Salim furious. Salim threatened to kill a hostage unless the BBC corrected its announcement by 2100 hours. The decision makers let the BBC correct the previous announcement to ease the tension. The announcement was made as the hostage takers had demanded. Thus, the hostage takers released another hostage.<sup>51</sup>

In the next two days, May 4 and 5, negotiations with the hostage takers continued, but the British Government did not make any promise to them and did not bring any Arab negotiators, as the hostage takers had demanded. The COBRA did not respond to the consistent messages from police negotiators about the demand for an Arab negotiator. This problem almost brought negotiations to a standstill. Additionally, the strange noises around the embassy building and in its walls made the hostage takers think the police were planning a rescue operation. Therefore, the tension in the embassy increased again when the hostage takers threatened for the second time to kill hostages if their demands were not met in 45 minutes. Then, three shots were heard. The negotiators could not be sure about what happened. De la Billiere, the director of SAS, reported the shots to the COBRA in order to get permission to begin military operation. But, the Home Secretary was not present.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 30.



After the call, the Home Secretary immediately came to London to discuss the military operation. In the COBRA, Home Secretary Whitelaw and the other members of the crisis management team examined all details of the military plan. De la Billiere summarized the military option and rehearsals that the SAS teams had done. At the end, Whitelaw approved the plan by telling de la Billiere that he would not interfere; and if the military operation failed, he would take full responsibility.<sup>53</sup> Then, de la Billiere ordered the SAS teams to be ready to take their positions and conduct a rescue operation on short notice. The SAS teams were ready to assault with ten minutes notice.

The negotiators made their last attempt to ease the tension inside the embassy by bringing an imam to talk to the leader of the hostage takers.<sup>54</sup> But Salim refused to talk with the imam; three more shots were heard from the embassy. After some time, a dead body was thrown outside from the main entrance of the embassy building. When medical personnel examined the body, they realized that the hostage had been dead for hours. Now, the British decision makers were sure at least one hostage had been killed; the second one might have been killed as well. Whitelaw immediately contacted Thatcher to get her final approval.<sup>55</sup> Thatcher approved the military rescue operation, and afterward, Whitelaw ordered de la Billiere to begin the operation; de la Billiere authorized the tactical commander, Colonel Rose, to conduct the operation.<sup>56</sup>

While the SAS teams were positioning, the negotiators kept the leader of the hostage takers busy by continuing to talk with him in order to preserve the secrecy and create surprise during the operation. The best-trained military unit in the British Armed Forces, the SAS, was ready to rescue the hostages and eliminate the hostage takers.

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<sup>53</sup> LaBilliere, *Looking for Trouble*, 329.

<sup>54</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins*, 31.

<sup>55</sup> Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Who Dares Wins*, 32.

### 3. Mission Execution and Results

Operation Nimrod is one of the most famous hostage rescue operations in history. The operation was successful because the hostages were rescued with only a few casualties while neutralizing all the hostage takers. The task force for the operation consisted of two SAS teams that were named the Red Team and the Blue Team. All SAS soldiers are highly trained professionals.

The operation began at 1923 hours on May 5. The Red team was going to rappel from the roof of the building; simultaneously the Blue team was going to enter the building from the ground floor. The simultaneous entry was not achieved because of a pre-mature initiation. Even though the uncoordinated entrance warned the hostage takers, the SAS teams stormed the building by entering from two directions evacuating the hostages. During the assault, the hostage takers had killed one of the hostages and wounded two.<sup>57</sup> The operation lasted 17 minutes.<sup>58</sup>

During the operation, the senior decision makers in the COBRA monitored radio communications between the SAS teams. They did not intervene in the execution phase of the operation. After the operation, Whitelaw went to the scene to thank the SAS teams as they prepared to return to base.<sup>59</sup> Prime Minister Thatcher visited the base of the SAS to congratulate the SAS soldiers who executed the rescue operation. She praised their bravery and professionalism and thanked them one by one.

The British decision makers sent a clear message to the international community with Operation Nimrod that the British authorities do not make deals with terrorists and that any kind of terror actions inside Britain will not succeed. Additionally, the SAS's success demonstrated SAS professionalism to the countries considering creating their own special units to combat terrorism.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Asher, *The Regiment: The Real Story of the SAS* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 16.

#### **4. Assessment of the Roles of Decision Makers**

This assessment is based on the decision makers' roles are examined in the three phases of this special operation: approval, preparation, and execution.

##### ***a. In the Approval Phase***

During the Iranian Embassy hostage-taking incident, Prime Minister Thatcher was not on the scene. Thatcher preferred to delegate her authority to the Home Secretary in the crisis. Her decision to delegate authority contributed to the flexibility of the decision-making process in the COBRA. While delegating authority, Thatcher discussed her policies with the Home Secretary. Based on this discussion, the COBRA managed the crisis without further problem or hesitation. Early framing of the rules of engagement and principles provided clear direction for the agents who took part in handling the crisis. Additionally, Thatcher was always in contact with the Home Secretary in case of emergency situations and for final mission approval. Therefore, her absence in the COBRA did not negatively affect efforts to solve the crisis and contributed to flexibility.

The British decision makers were not entirely successful in lowering the risk to the hostages prior operation. One of Thatcher's principles was to negotiate with the hostage takers in order to reach a peaceful or less risky solution rather than conducting a hostage rescue operation. However, it is hard to claim that the British senior decision makers sought every opportunity to lower the risk to the hostages; neither did they attempt less risky solutions. First of all, the demands of the hostage takers were not consistent with the principles that the senior British decision makers agreed on. Secondly, the British decision makers decided to stall rather than meet the demands. But, this attitude made the hostage takers nervous and increased the risk to the hostages. Lastly, the British decision makers did not bring any other solutions to the table while negotiating with the hostage takers.

For instance, the British decision makers did not accept the request for Arab diplomatic negotiators. They did not do anything to appease the hostage takers and keep them calm. The decision makers ignored demands and caused two lives to be lost before fully realizing the seriousness of the situation. However, the British decision makers

might have offered other options to the hostage takers, such as considering diplomats from other nationalities as negotiators. Thus, they could have kept the hostage takers calm and gained more time for a less risky solution. The British decision makers were not very careful with the lives of the hostages in this regard.

Furthermore, the initial plan for the rescue operation was not perfect. As time progressed, the planners improved the plan based on available intelligence. The British decision makers approved the plan only after the terrorists killed the two hostages. It is hard to understand why the British decision makers waited until the hostage takers had killed two people. They could have initiated the rescue after being sure that the operation's risk was reasonable. Additionally, the British decision makers were aware that there was no possibility of meeting the demands of the hostage takers and that negotiations would not end with a peaceful solution. Therefore, continuing the negotiations until the killings was unnecessary, especially considering they had a rescue plan with acceptable risk.

During the approval phase of the operation, the British decision makers did not spend much effort to gain international or public support to conduct the operation. The British authorities were eager to handle the crisis alone. Their not providing an Arab negotiator also illustrates this point.

Prime Minister Thatcher did not want to unnecessarily risk hostages' lives during the Iranian Embassy hostage taking incident; but above all, she wanted to demonstrate to the international community that terrorism must be defeated.<sup>60</sup> The decision to send a message to the international community and terrorists worldwide resulted in two hostages' lives being lost. However, it could have ended much worse.

Approval of the military operation was a political decision. Whitelaw displayed great leadership giving his approval for the military rescue operation. He assured de la Billiere that he would not interfere; and if the operation failed, he would take full

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<sup>60</sup> Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 89.

responsibility. Whitelaw's attitude impressed his subordinates, especially de la Billiere.<sup>61</sup> He showed that he was ready to shoulder responsibility rather than protect his career.

***b. In the Preparation Phase***

First, in the preparation phase, the British decision makers chose the best unit in the British Armed Forces, the SAS. The rescue task force consisted of the best-trained soldiers; they were specially trained for counterterrorism operations. The SAS's professionalism, detailed planning, and bravery of the teams produced success.

Second, the decision makers initially approved negotiations in order to solve the problem peacefully. However, the demands of the hostage takers were contrary to the policies that the Prime Minister and other senior decision makers agreed upon. This fact reduced the chance of successful negotiations and led the decision makers to think more seriously about the military rescue. Thus, after the announcement of the demands, the role of the negotiations became an effort to gain time for the military operation and convince the hostage takers to release as many hostages as possible. Although negotiations gained some time for the planners and the intelligence service, two hostages died during the negotiation process.

Third, during the crisis, the British decision makers displayed good coordination. The operation benefited from the coordinated work of the COBRA. The members of the COBRA responded quickly to the needs of the SAS. For instance, in the preparation phase of the operation, the military planners needed exact intelligence in order to improve their plan and lessen the risk of the operation. The intelligence service, MI5, responded quickly to the demand of the military planners and planted listening devices on the walls between the Iranian Embassy and the Ethiopian Embassy. The responsive coordination of the COBRA solved the problem. The airport authorities changed the route for landing planes, which covered the noise of the thinning of the walls. In normal times, this would take days because of bureaucratic procedures. The decision to establish COBRA made

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<sup>61</sup> LaBilliere, *Looking for Trouble*, 329.

the coordination easy and responsive. The British decision makers were good at coordinating among themselves.

The British decision makers could not display the same coordination ability while contacting Arab diplomats to convince them to be negotiators. The British decision makers preferred to go slow. Thatcher might have accelerated the process, but she decided to delegate her authority to the Home Secretary. Because of the slow process to find Arab diplomats, the hostage-takers became angry and killed a hostage. Conceivably, if the British decision makers gave the impression of making every effort to convince Arabian diplomats to be negotiators, this may have kept the hostage takers calm, preserved the secrecy of the rescue attempt, and gained more time for the planners.

*c. In the Execution Phase*

Senior civilian and military decision makers' intervention during the execution of the operation was minimal. They monitored radio communications between the SAS teams during the execution without intervening. Colonel Rose, the tactical commander, was in charge of the operation. After the operation, Prime Minister Thatcher went to the base of the SAS soldiers to congratulate them. She praised their success and professionalism and thanked them. Thatcher's behavior was an exemplar of a decision maker who stands behind the men who take great risk in serving their country.

**5. Conclusion**

Operation Nimrod is another valuable case for examining the roles of decision makers in special operations. The level of intervention of British decision makers in the approval, preparation, and execution phases provides valuable information for testing the hypotheses of the study.

**C. OPERATION EAGLE CLAW**

Operation Eagle Claw was the failed rescue attempt of 53 American hostages held in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Iran, in 1979. The operation involved an insertion of a joint task force consisting of Delta Force, Rangers, U.S. Air Force pilots, and U.S. Marine Corps helicopter pilots to secure an area to use as a base for the rescue operation.

During the infiltration, several helicopters had mechanical problems, which led to aborting the mission. A helicopter hovered into a C130 as the force prepared to depart Iran, killing and injuring many of the participants. The rescue task force returned leaving crashed aircraft, equipment, documents, and casualties. A review of the operation brought significant changes in the U.S. Special Operations community. Examining Operation Eagle Claw sheds light on the topic of the roles of decision makers in special operations.

## **1. Political-Military Situation**

For many years before the Islamic revolution, the relationship between Iran and the United States was very close. Iran was a dependable partner in the Middle East for the United States. The Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, provided a continual oil supply to the United States; in return, the United States provided military and economic aid to Iran. In 1963, the Shah commenced the modernization of Iran through reforms. These reforms led to economic growth and modernization in the governmental institutions. However, Pahlavi's reforms drew negative reactions from fundamentalist Iranians, especially from Ayatollah Khomeini and his supporters.<sup>62</sup>

The Shah responded severely to the negative reactions from Khomeini's supporters. The repressive process made more people support Khomeini. In the 1970s, numerous strikes and demonstrations began to take place. In September 1978, the revolutionist Iranians toppled the Shah and sent him into exile. Ayatollah Khomeini, who returned from exile in France, took control of Iran and established the Islamic Republic of Iran. Anti-Americanism strongly espoused by the new regime, began to spread among the Iranian people, particularly students. Anti-American students routinely conducted mass demonstrations in front of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. After learning that the toppled Shah was in the United States for medical treatment, the students became furious and gathered to attack the U.S. Embassy.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Paul B. Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 6.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

## **2. Concept of Operation and Roles of Decision Makers**

On November 4, 1979, a growing number of anti-American Iranian students were protesting in front of the U.S. Embassy.<sup>64</sup> The crowd was chanting to get back the shah for the revolutionary government to try him. Tension among the crowd rose as more and more people gathered. Then the protesters stormed the U.S. Embassy, swarmed the embassy's compound within minutes, and captured 66 American citizens and took them hostage. Afterward, the hostage takers made an announcement to declare their demand. The demand was the capture and deportation of the exiled Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, so that he could be tried in an Iranian court for his regime's human rights violations. At the time, the shah was in the United States for medical treatment. The U.S. government refused to extradite the shah because of the high probability of his execution. This made the situation more serious. The hostage takers threatened to interrogate the U.S. hostages and keep them blindfolded. Moreover, the Iranian government asserted that they could not control the hostage takers. They claimed that the hostage takers would decide the destiny of the hostages in the embassy.<sup>65</sup>

President Jimmy Carter's first reaction to the incident was underscoring the vital importance of the hostages' lives. President Carter's priority was to secure the safe release of the hostages by conducting indirect negotiations with the Iran regime via the intervention of the United Nations. After a week of unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with the new regime and the hostage takers, the U.S. government enacted economic sanctions against Iran and froze Iranian bank accounts in U.S. banks. During the first few months of the crisis, the U.S. government and the United Nations again made numerous efforts for the release of the hostages. The UN secretary-general met with Iran's new government officials during the incident, but the result was not promising. The United States government also tried to cajole its allies to impose sanctions on Iran. By late March 1980, Carter began to realize that the negotiation process was not going to be

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<sup>64</sup> Vandenbourcke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as An Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 114.

<sup>65</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 7.



successful. At the meeting on March 22, Carter approved a reconnaissance aircraft be sent into Iranian air space to find a suitable landing site for a rescue force, which meant American decision makers moving towards a military rescue operation. Almost all top decision makers were in agreement about a rescue mission.<sup>66</sup>

President Carter already approved examining possible military options within two days after the seizure of the U.S. Embassy. Initial estimates of the chance of success were very low because of various difficulties: logistics, infiltration, reaching the embassy, and exfiltration from Tehran. Despite this, planners continued to seek a feasible plan and solutions for complicated logistical issues. Meanwhile, the core element of the rescue force was training. The planning process continued secretly along with negotiations.<sup>67</sup>

Unfortunately, it was obvious that the negotiation process was not successful at releasing the hostages. Furthermore, the American presidential election was near. Therefore, the decision whether to conduct a rescue operation or not had to be made quickly. Three important meetings took place to discuss the operation. The first meeting was on March 22. In this meeting all top American decision makers agreed to think seriously about a rescue mission option. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Adviser, almost all top decision makers were on the same page about a rescue operation if negotiations failed.<sup>68</sup> The second meeting on April 11 was key because President Carter informed his cabinet that he had authorized the military rescue mission.<sup>69</sup> The discussions at the March 22 meeting foreshadowed the decision taken on April 11. In the final meeting on April 15, American decision makers listened to the details of the rescue operation. This meeting was the last time that American decision makers discussed the operation. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who was the only a key

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<sup>66</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 501.

<sup>67</sup> Steve Smith, "The Hostage Rescue Mission," *Foreign Policy Implementation*, 1985, 11–32.

<sup>68</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York: 1983), 493.

<sup>69</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 49.

official against the operation, stated his doubts about the decision. Nevertheless, Carter did not change his mind about the rescue mission.<sup>70</sup>

Secretary Vance objected to the rescue operation for various reasons. He maintained that the United States should not conduct a rescue operation because hostages were not in physical danger.<sup>71</sup> Vance also asserted that Khomeini was using hostages to strengthen his control in Iran. Another reason for his opposition to a military rescue mission was that a rescue attempt would risk the hostages' lives, and endanger U.S. interests and American people in the region. Vance also assumed that a military assault might create increased anti-Americanism in the Muslim world.

However, National Security Advisor Brzezinski supported a rescue mission from the beginning. He talked with President Carter and advised him to begin the preparation process. He asserted that a rescue mission was a "moral and political obligation to the hostages, and was a matter of national honor."<sup>72</sup> Brzezinski also claimed that a rescue in Tehran would serve as a deterrent against the Soviets and rest of the world as well. President Carter accepted the idea and appointed Brzezinski as a coordinator to oversee the preparation process of the rescue mission.<sup>73</sup> Brzezinski organized a special coordination committee to plan the rescue. The committee consisted of Brzezinski, Defense Secretary Harold Brown, Admiral Stansfield Turner, the director of CIA, General David Jones as Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Lt. General John S. Pustay as his assistant.<sup>74</sup> As a director of the committee, although he had no authority over the other members and planners, Brzezinski maintained strict control of the preparation process.

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<sup>70</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>73</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Failed Mission," *New York Times Magazine* 18 (1982): 28–29.

<sup>74</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 12.

Other members resented Brzezinski's attitude during the committee meetings.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, he often interfered with the planners by over-supervision.<sup>76</sup>

Major General James B. Vaught was responsible for the security of the preparation process and operational details of the rescue mission. The Army chief of staff nominated Vaught to lead the rescue task force. Vaught experienced various problems while leading the rescue mission. Many things that had to be done before the rescue mission could not be done because of security considerations. Security considerations also restricted the efforts of establishing a Joint Task Force. To preserve secrecy in the preparation phase, the rescue task force did not do full-scale rehearsals.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, overemphasizing security precautions hindered communication between the rescue force units during the infiltration of the rescue operation.<sup>78</sup>

Another problem General Vaught faced was the unclear chain of command for the rescue task force. Major General Philip G. Gast, of the U.S. Air Force, who was senior to General Vaught, was appointed as special consultant to the rescue task force. During the preparation process, Vaught faced numerous intelligence-related problems. Lack of CIA agents in Tehran negatively affected the planning. Photos of the embassy were not available, which added to the preparation time. The hostages' exact location was unknown until the last minute. This information was important to save time in the embassy searching for hostages. Colonel Charlie Beckwith, the commander of the ground force for the operation, would receive the intelligence about the hostages' location at the very last minute and modified the assault plan accordingly.<sup>79</sup> According to Beckwith, the majority of the intelligence was untested and coming from different systems, which made

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<sup>75</sup> Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Fateful Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), 216.

<sup>76</sup> Charlie A. Beckwith and Donald Knox, *Delta Force* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 188.

<sup>77</sup> Steve Smith, "Policy Preferences and Bureaucratic Position: The Case of the American Hostage Rescue Mission," *International Affairs*, 61, no. 1 (1984): 129.

<sup>78</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 20.

<sup>79</sup> Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*, 264.

the planners spend more time on raw information.<sup>80</sup> In addition, the Special Operation Review Group stated in its report that the Intelligence Community was slow in responding to the intelligence requests of the planners.<sup>81</sup>

After the approval of the mission, the rescue task force leaders met with President Carter in the White House on April 16, 1980, to present the details of the Operation Eagle Claw.<sup>82</sup> Carter asked several questions about possible challenges during the operations. Additionally, he directed the force commanders to be sure not to harm innocent people and eschew killing whenever possible.<sup>83</sup> Carter wanted to limit the size of the rescue force to prevent unwanted loss of life. Carter's concern was to avoid the eagerness of the rescue force to engage in gunfire with Iranians by limiting the size of the rescue force. The rescue mission was not to be perceived as an aggressive, punitive military action, but a humanitarian mission designed to save American lives.<sup>84</sup>

The rescue task force consisted of Delta Force, U.S. Rangers, U.S. Air Force pilots, and U.S. Marine Corps helicopter pilots. Delta Force consisted of the best-trained Special Operators in the U.S. Army. Air force pilots and marine helicopter pilots were chosen very carefully according to their experience and night flight ability.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, some Marine helicopter pilots did not have the necessary experience for the mission.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the operators did not have any joint training or even any joint procedures to be able to conduct a difficult mission like Operation Eagle Claw.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>81</sup> Special Operations Review Group, "Rescue Mission Report" (Washington, D.C., August 1980), 19–20.

<sup>82</sup> Smith, "Policy Preferences and Bureaucratic Position: The Case of the American Hostage Rescue Mission," 9.

<sup>83</sup> Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*, 5–8.

<sup>84</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 3.

<sup>85</sup> Vandenbourcke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as An Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 124.

<sup>86</sup> Dwight Jon Zimmerman and John Gresham, *Beyond Hell and Back: How America's Special Operations Forces Became the World's Greatest Fighting Unit* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 111.

<sup>87</sup> Bryan D. Brown, "U.S. Special Operations Command: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century" (DTIC Document, 2006), 2.

### 3. Mission Execution and Results

In the early hours of April 24, 1980, the rescue force consisting 130 Delta Force operators, U.S. Rangers, U.S. Air Force pilots, and U.S. Marine Corps helicopter pilots flew into the Iranian desert, to Desert One. Delta Force, infiltrating on MC130s, reached the designated place on time without problems. However, it was not the same for the helicopter pilots because of the weather. One helicopter landed in the desert because of a malfunction on its blade; the pilots decided not to fly the helicopter further and abandoned it. Additionally, the second helicopter returned because of another mechanical problem. Six helicopters reached Desert One 85 minutes behind schedule. Unfortunately, one of the six remaining helicopters had a mechanical problem in Desert One. Five helicopters remained for the rest of the mission, but six helicopters were the minimum requirement to continue the mission.<sup>88</sup>

Beckwith decided to abort the mission when he was told that only five helicopters were left to fly to Desert Two. Beckwith knew he needed at least six helicopters because he expected to lose another two helicopters during the exfiltration. Once the Carter Administration learned about Beckwith's decision, Brzezinski advised President Carter to continue with five helicopters. Beckwith was upset about the request, and would not change his decision. Consequently, Carter supported the decision to abort the mission based on the recommendations from Beckwith.<sup>89</sup>

After aborting the mission, one helicopter crashed into a C-130 during exfiltration while taking off. Both aircraft exploded; huge flames raged toward the other aircraft. Unfortunately, eight U.S. soldiers—five Air Force personnel and three Marines—died in Desert One. The bodies of the Americans were left behind during the panic and confusion, as were several intact helicopters, equipment, maps, and other material.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Vandenbourcke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as An Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 150.

<sup>89</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 86.

<sup>90</sup> Vandenbourcke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as An Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 150.

Carter made a public speech to tell the American people that he took full responsibility for the failed rescue operation. He also promised to continue to take every opportunity to save the hostages. Later on, the failure caused the precipitous decline of Carter's popularity in the eyes of the American people; he lost his reelection.<sup>91</sup>

The hostage-taking incident continued for 444-days; the situation greatly affected both the United States and Iran. In the summer of 1980, the death of the shah in Egypt and the election of a new Iranian parliament eased the tensions on both sides and restarted negotiations. Khomeini declared several conditions for releasing the hostages. The U.S. government ignored the declaration. Afterward, the Iranians approved mediation by Algerian representatives. On January 18, 1981, the Iranian government signed an agreement in Algiers.<sup>92</sup> Soon afterward, the U.S. government unfroze Iran's financial assets in the U.S. banks. The 52 hostages were released and the hostage crisis was over.

#### **4. Assessment of the Roles of Decision Makers**

This assessment is based on the case study. Decision makers' roles are examined in three phases of this special operation: approval, preparation, and execution.

##### ***a. In the Approval Phase***

The senior American decision makers' roles were substantial in the approval phase of Operation Eagle Claw. American decision makers had different views about the solution to the hostage incident based on their concerns. Initially, President Carter was against any military action because he believed it would risk lives. Considering the range, logistical problems, and lack of intelligence, President Carter was right. For this reason, Carter began to seek ways to negotiate with the hostage takers and the new Iranian regime, which seemed less risky and wiser. However, negotiations could not free the

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<sup>91</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 96.

<sup>92</sup> "Iranian Hostage Crisis," in *Encyclopedia of United States National Security*, by Richard Samuels (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 3, <http://sk.sagepub.com/reference/nationalsecurity/n318.xml>.

hostages. Prolonged captivity began to put more pressure on the American decision makers and led them to consider the high-risk military option. They tried less risky options for more than five months before deciding to conduct the rescue operation. However, by the time the rescue mission was executed, the hostages' lives were not under direct threat. None of the hostages had been killed or threatened before the execution of the mission. Thereby, one can conclude that the decision to conduct the rescue mission was not the last option for the American decision makers. Because of the high risk of the rescue operation, decision makers should have only approved the rescue mission if the hostages' lives were severely threatened by the hostage takers. Therefore, American decision makers appear to have ignored less risky options because of the pressure of upcoming elections and the prolonged hostage incident.

During the hostage crisis, the American decision makers took several steps to apply international pressure on the new Iranian regime. First, the American government contacted its allies to convince them to impose economic sanctions along with the United States. Additionally, President Carter used the UN to try to force the new Iranian regime to release the hostages. In this respect, the UN Secretary served as a negotiator. Apparently, the American decision makers tried international pressure as a less risky option to solve the crisis before deciding on a rescue mission.

National Security Advisor Brzezinski was a dedicated supporter of a rescue mission because he saw the crisis as an opportunity to send a message to the Soviet Union and the rest of the world. According to Brzezinski, the rescue operation would show the power of the United States to conduct a special operation anywhere in the world. Additionally, Brzezinski perceived the crisis as a matter of American honor; the crisis cast doubt on the American power. Thus, while deciding to conduct a rescue mission, the American decision makers also aimed to send a message to the Soviet Union, allies in the region, and the rest of the world.

The upcoming elections might have served as a catalyst for the decision to execute the rescue mission. President Carter was running for reelection and polls showed that his popularity was decreasing among voters. This fact may have influenced Carter to approve the rescue mission. Carter's career considerations may have affected his

decision. It is not fair to say, though, that he acted solely based only on his career concerns. Surely, his first priority was the hostages' lives.

***b. In the Preparation Phase***

During the preparation phase, some of the American decision makers intervened more than necessary. The White House desire of keeping the rescue force small was an example of intervention.<sup>93</sup> The need for secrecy was the primary reason for the Carter Administration's attitude about a small rescue force. Their continuous interfering caused the planners and other senior decision makers to lose focus.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, deciding the number of helicopters used for the rescue mission was affected by Carter's priority to demonstrate the humanitarian nature of the operation. According to Colonel Beckwith, they needed more helicopters at the beginning because of the helicopter's undependability. However, General Vaught and the planners in the Pentagon thought that only eight helicopters could fit on the Nimitz.<sup>95</sup> In fact, 12 helicopters could have taken off from the Nimitz.<sup>96</sup> In addition to President Carter, National Security Advisor Brzezinski was another figure who unnecessarily interfered during the preparation phase of the mission. Because of the constant presence of senior decision makers, military commanders were not comfortable to make a decision according to their expertise. Senior American decision makers, especially President Carter, should have delegated their authority to get the best from their subordinates.

American decision makers chose their best-trained unit as a ground force for the mission. Delta Force soldiers were specially trained for counterterrorism operations. U.S. Air Force pilots were chosen according to their experience and talents. Nevertheless, the U.S. Marine Corps pilots were not trained for long-range night flying. Only the Air Force helicopter pilots had this experience. The units chosen for the mission lacked joint

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<sup>93</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 38.

<sup>94</sup> LaBilliere, *Looking for Trouble*, 319.

<sup>95</sup> Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*, 233.

<sup>96</sup> Ryan, *The Iranian Rescue Mission*, 39.



training. The helicopter pilots chosen for the mission were not sufficiently familiar with the aircraft they were tasked to fly.

During the preparation, coordination between government agencies was inadequate. At the beginning of the preparation phase, the planners did not have sufficient information to develop a plan.<sup>97</sup> Transferring the necessary intelligence to help the planners develop a rescue plan was not performed well. Additionally, the necessary intelligence to rehearse the mission was not provided to the ground force. Even the exact location of hostages inside the embassy came at the very last minute.<sup>98</sup> These last minute updates caused last minute adjustments in training, logistics, and personnel requirements. Weather intelligence also was not passed to pilots before the execution of the operation.

In the preparation phase, the decision makers were overly sensitive about the secrecy of the rescue mission. Their consistent caveats about secrecy put more pressure on the planners and the executors of the operation. Additionally, unnecessary security concerns also constrained efforts to establish a joint task force structure.

*c. In the Execution Phase*

The role of senior level American leaders during the execution phase of the operation was insignificant. They did not intervene in the execution of the operation until the abort decision, which was an appropriate point of senior level involvement. When Beckwith decided to abort the mission, the decision makers asked him again if the mission was possible with the remaining helicopters.<sup>99</sup> The intervention of the decision makers by questioning Beckwith's decision was not appropriate. If Beckwith continued the mission with five helicopters, the operation might have been a greater tragedy for the rescue task force and the hostages.

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<sup>97</sup> Beckwith and Knox, *Delta Force*, 195.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

The American decision makers' extreme concern about secrecy also negatively affected the execution phase of the operation just as it did the preparation phase. Communication between the helicopter pilots during infiltration was not permitted. The airplane pilots could not pass necessary weather information to the helicopter pilots. The loss of helicopters might have been prevented if the airplane pilots had a chance to warn the helicopter pilots about the weather.

## **5. Conclusion**

Rescuing 53 American hostages from thousands of miles away inside an enemy state is a daunting mission. Operation Eagle Claw failed but the U.S. ultimately built U.S. Special Operations Command based on the lessons learned from the mission. Likewise, as an example of a failed special operation, Operation Eagle Claw offers valuable information about the roles of decision makers during a special operation to test the hypotheses of the study. Learning from the mistakes of the American senior decision makers can help future decision makers to avoid the same mistakes.

## **D. THE MOSCOW THEATER HOSTAGE CRISIS**

The Moscow Theater hostage crisis is a well-known incident that was solved by conducting a special operation. Russian Special Forces, Spetsnaz, conducted a rescue operation to end the siege that cost hundreds of hostages' lives. Though a few articles have been written about the incident, few have examined the roles of Russian decision makers during the crisis. This case aims to do so.

### **1. Political-Military Situation**

The Moscow hostage-taking incident occurred October 23–26, 2002. The incident is publicly known as “The October 2002 Moscow Hostage Taking.” Before the incident, the negotiations between Chechen leadership and Russian authorities were in progress.

The incident involved three sides: moderate Chechens, Chechen extremists, and the Kremlin. Each side aimed to maximize its own interests during the event.<sup>100</sup>

Radical Chechens, whose leaders were Shamil Basaev and Movladi Udugov, had begun blowing up targets in Russian cities—Moscow, Buinaksk, and Volgodonks—in 1999 to terrorize the whole Russian population and to denigrate the reputation of Aslan Maskhadov, who had gained the support of the West and was ready to negotiate a solution to the Chechen conflict.<sup>101</sup> In this respect, the radical Chechens carried out the hostage-taking assault to end the negotiations between moderate Chechens and the Russian authorities. Another goal of the Chechen extremists was to get financial support from the Gulf States and other Muslim countries by attacking Russians.<sup>102</sup>

Meanwhile, moderate Chechens, led by Aslan Maskhadov, were supporting the negotiations with Russian authorities to solve the Chechen conflict. Therefore, they did not support the hostage-taking terrorist action in Dubrovka; they declared that the Chechen leadership headed by Maskhadov denounced hostile actions against civilians.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, moderate Chechens advised the hostage-takers to negotiate with the Russian authorities and release the hostages immediately.

The Kremlin leadership was under the heavy political pressure within Russia and from the West to negotiate with the moderate Chechens headed by Aslan Maskhadov to solve the conflict in Chechnya. The protracted Chechen conflict was tarnishing President Vladimir Putin's approval ratings. However, Russian authorities sought ways to legitimize the war against the Chechens in Chechnya. The biggest problem was that the separatist Chechen movement gained sympathy from abroad. The Russian government was waiting for a chance to show the rest of the world that Chechen separatists were

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<sup>100</sup> John B. Dunlop and Donald N. Jensen, *The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan Hostage Crises: A Critique of Russian Counter-Terrorism* (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2006), 104.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 137.

terrorists and had a relationship with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.<sup>104</sup> The Moscow Theatre hostage crisis provided the opportunity that the Russian government was heartily seeking.

## **2. Concept of Operation and Role of Decision Makers**

Forty Chechen terrorists attacked the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow and took control of the theater and the 979 people inside the building on October 23, 2002, at 9:00 p.m.<sup>105</sup> The terrorists had automatic weapons and hand grenades and some of them were wearing suicide belts. They also placed a number of bombs throughout the building. The leader of the terrorists stated that they were a suicide group and they came not to kill the hostages or fight against the Russian forces. The terrorists demanded that military operations in Chechnya end and those Russian federal troops withdraw.<sup>106</sup> They simply wanted to end the Second Chechen War which was dominated by the Russian military forces and had killed thousands of Chechens.

After receiving the initial news, President Putin called an emergency meeting with his advisers to discuss how to end the hostage-taking crisis in the Dubrovka Theater. At the same time, he sent the country's elite counterterrorism Special Forces squad to the scene.<sup>107</sup> The Russian authorities managed the negotiations using different individuals to buy time for planning the mission and to try to convince the terrorists to release the hostages. Putin made his decision to storm the building while negotiations were taking place.<sup>108</sup>

During the crisis, Russian authorities made several declarations to the terrorists and the public. First, Russian authorities announced that there was an Arab terrorist with

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>106</sup> "Hostage-Takers 'Ready to Die,'" *BBC*, October 25, 2002, sec. Europe, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2360735.stm>.

<sup>107</sup> Michael Wines, "Chechens Seize Moscow Theater, Taking as Many as 600 Hostages," *New York Times*, October 24, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/24/world/chechens-seize-moscow-theater-taking-as-many-as-600-hostages.html>.

<sup>108</sup> "Yavlinsky Describes His Role in Crisis," *Moscow Times*, November 4, 2002.

the Chechen terrorists and asserted that this fact proved Al-Qaeda's involvement in the incident. Later on, the director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) announced that the terrorists' lives were guaranteed if they released the hostages; he made this announcement after having a meeting with Putin.<sup>109</sup> In addition, the chair of the Federation Council addressed the terrorists and hostages via a radio program. He stated that if the hostage takers released the hostages, the Russian authorities would let the Chechens leave Russia safely. These statements were made to gain time to prepare the operation.

In the meantime, Special Forces soldiers were seeking every opportunity to get intelligence about the building. The negotiation process provided great opportunities to gather tactical intelligence. Soldiers used electronic and acoustic surveillance to monitor movements of the terrorists.<sup>110</sup> They placed listening devices using the sewers to get close to the terrorists.<sup>111</sup> After finalizing the plan, the military authorities briefed Putin about the details. Putin gave to "go ahead" and the operation was ready to begin.

### **3. Mission Execution and Results**

Many experts think that the hostage rescue operation itself was completed effectively; however, the hostages' protection was ignored in order to preserve the secrecy of the operation. Before entering the building, the now famous incident occurred; the Russian Special Forces pumped poisonous sleeping gas into the building through the air-conditioning system to incapacitate the terrorists inside.<sup>112</sup> The decision to use gas was made by the operation headquarters but Putin gave the final permission.

The operation began during the early hours of the morning on October 26. Dozens of heavily armed and masked Spetsnaz soldiers entered the building from all sides. One team burst into the theater from the basement; another unit stormed through the front

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<sup>109</sup> Dunlop and Jensen, *The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan Hostage Crises*, 142.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>111</sup> "How Special Forces Ended Siege," *BBC News*, October 29, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2363601.stm>.

<sup>112</sup> Dunlop and Jensen, *The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan Hostage Crises*, 145.

door.<sup>113</sup> There was shooting between special forces soldiers and the terrorists still conscious because they were not on the main stage of the theater. Spetsnaz soldiers killed all the terrorists and announced that the theater was secure less than two hours after the operation began.<sup>114</sup>

At the end of the operation, most of the hostages died apparently because of the effects of the gas, not from terrorists' bullets.<sup>115</sup> Five hostages were killed by terrorists; the actual death toll due to poisonous gas and the lack of available medical care was about 130 hostages.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, it is understood that all bombs located in the theater building at Dubrovka Theater were fake and therefore incapable of detonating.<sup>117</sup> It is not clear, though, whether the Russian Special Forces soldiers were aware of this fact.

After the hostage rescue operation, President Putin invited the Russian Special Forces soldiers who conducted the operation to a special reception at the Kremlin in order to congratulate them.

#### **4. Assessment of the Roles of Decision Makers**

This assessment is based on this case study. Decision makers' roles are examined in three phases of this special operation: approval, preparation, and execution.

##### ***a. In the Approval Phase***

Senior Russian decision makers did not consider less risky solutions to the hostage-taking incident. Many experts think that the Russian authorities were unwilling to accept the demands of the terrorists. The crisis could have ended with fewer casualties by continuing the negotiations. Thus, one can conclude that Russian decision makers,

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<sup>113</sup> "How Special Forces Ended Siege."

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> "Moscow Theatre Siege: Questions Remain Unanswered," *BBC News*, October 24, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20067384>.

<sup>116</sup> Quentin Bushon, "Chechen Terror in Moscow, The Dubrovka Theatre," *Journal of Homeland and National Security Perspectives* 1, no. 2 (2014): 7.

<sup>117</sup> Dunlop and Jensen, *The 2002 Dubrovka and 2004 Beslan Hostage Crises*, 106.

notably Putin, was eager to conduct the special operation and was willing to risk the lives of hostages in the Dubrovka Theater.

Russian decision makers took smart steps to gain international and domestic support to legitimize the military rescue operation before the approval of the rescue operation. The announcement of an Arab terrorist's presence among the Chechen terrorists was the first step; this was proof of Al-Qaeda's alleged involvement. Thus, the appearance of an Arab terrorist made the incident an international terrorist attack. By killing the hostage takers, the Russian government would send a message to the terrorists and set an example of a state fighting against the international terrorist organization, Al-Qaida. The statement was also designed to get domestic support for the operation against terrorists or Chechens. At that time, the Russian government was losing public support for the war in Chechnya. This incident would help to win public support. International and domestic support would affect the perception of the outcomes of the operation. Russian decision makers thought that the Russian people would not react too strongly, even if the surgical strike operation failed or if hostages lost their lives. Ultimately, these steps did not provide the international support that the Russian decision makers expected, but the domestic support for the operation and the war in Chechnya was gained as planned.

Considering the outcomes of the Dubrovka hostage-taking crisis, Putin used the raid to send a clear message to the Chechen separatists, the Russian people, and the international community. He did not accede to the demands of the terrorists; he preferred to risk hundreds of lives. Putin might have thought that if he agreed to the demands of the terrorists, it would be an invitation for similar attempts all over Russia. Thus, he decided to take his chances to send a message to the Chechens that this kind of terrorist action does not deter Russian authorities. This shows that the Russian authorities were determined to face all possible consequences of the operation.

***b. In the Preparation Phase***

Russian decision makers selected the right unit to plan and conduct the special operation to rescue hostages in the Dubrovka Theater. The Spetsnaz, Russia's SOF, was

the best-trained unit capable of conducting counterterrorism operations. The detailed plan and execution of the operation demonstrated the professionalism of the Spetsnaz units that conducted the hostage rescue operation except for the death of 130 civilians because of using contagious gas.

Even though the Russian decision makers were criticized about unwisely managing the negotiations, negotiations with the terrorists bought time for the preparation to conduct the hostage rescue operation. Russian decision makers let several negotiators talk to the hostage takers. The negotiators bought time and succeeded in gaining the release of some hostages. The negotiation process not only saved some of the lives of the hostages but also provided crucially important intelligence to the planners of the operation.

The Dubrovka hostage crisis, on the other hand, showed that the Russian decision makers ignored coordination among agencies. This is evident because there were not enough medical personnel outside of the theater to deal with the gassed hostages. Moreover, Spetsnaz soldiers, not medical crews, carried unconscious hostages onto the sidewalk; some of the hostages were put on buses rather than ambulances for transfer to hospitals.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, the information about the type of the gas used by SOF was not provided to the medical personnel so that they could prepare antidotes for the unconscious hostages. According to Adam Dolnik and Richard Pilch, the failure of the military authorities to inform medical personnel about the gas beforehand and to make necessary coordination worsened the consequences of the hostage rescue operation.<sup>119</sup>

*c. In the Execution Phase*

The role of senior level Russian decision makers during the execution phase of the operation was negligible. The Spetsnaz was responsible for the execution phase of the rescue operation. After the operation, Putin congratulated the Spetsnaz soldiers with a

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<sup>118</sup> Bushon, "Chechen Terror in Moscow, The Dubrovka Theatre," 7.

<sup>119</sup> Adam Dolnik and Richard Pilch, "The Moscow Theater Hostage Crisis: The Perpetrators, Their Tactics, and the Russian Response," *International Negotiation* 8, no. 3 (2003): 577–611.



special reception in the Kremlin. As the most senior decision maker, he showed his support to the Spetsnaz forces. Putin's behavior represents additional an additional important factor – support to the troops.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Moscow Theatre hostage crisis is a valuable case study to examine how Russian decision makers behaved in a crisis situation that requires a special operation for a solution. In the approval phase of the operation, the presence of the Russian decision makers was strong. In the preparation phase, the Russian decision makers did not intervene in the process. By not involving, senior leaders allowed the lack of coordination to result in deaths that might have been avoided. In execution phase, the Russian decision makers provided good examples for future decision makers by not interfering. Consequently, examining the roles of the Russian decision makers during the crisis contributes to testing the hypotheses of this thesis.

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### **III. VALIDATING THE HYPOTHESES**

In this chapter, I examine the validity of the hypotheses based on the analyses of four case studies. The hypotheses help answer the research question, *what are the roles of senior level decision makers in special operations?*

#### **A. HYPOTHESIS 1**

The first hypothesis is that the level of decision makers' control and involvement should be high in the approval phase of special operations. In all four cases, senior decision makers' involvement was high –as one would expect– because of two reasons: the great risks of the operations and possible unwanted consequences. In the approval phase of Operation Thunderbolt, the Israeli senior decision makers had numerous meetings to find less risky solutions before approving the military operation. The negotiations process and attempts to put international pressure on Idi Amin were the less risky but efforts by Israeli decision makers to solve the crisis were unsuccessful. Additionally, the Israeli decision makers examined thoroughly all ramifications of the high-risk operation. They were aware of the fact that the hostages' safety, Israel's future, and their political careers were on the line. Therefore, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin wanted Cabinet approval to execute the rescue operation.

In the approval phase of Operation Nimrod, senior decision makers were at the forefront. Even though Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher preferred to delegate authority to the Home Secretary, she drew a framework to guide the COBRA. The COBRA served as a decision-making element during the crisis and led the negotiation process. All responses to the demands of the hostage takers came from the COBRA. The decision to conduct the special operation to rescue hostages was taken by COBRA under the leadership of Home Secretary William Whitelaw with the approval of Prime Minister Thatcher.

The American decision makers were very active during the approval phase of Operation Eagle Claw, which was the longest among four case studies. In comparison to the previous two cases, President Jimmy Carter played a substantial role himself; maybe

the reason for this is the presidential system in the United States. During the approval phase, President Carter held meetings to discuss the possible solutions, and the consequences of these solutions. Initially, President Carter tried negotiations to free the hostages as a less risky solution, which was not successful. While continuing negotiations, he also attempted to apply international pressure and imposed economic sanctions to put the Iranian government in a more difficult situation. However, these peaceful and less risky solutions were not enough to secure the release of the U.S. hostages. Because of the high risk of a military operation, President Carter wanted to try all other less risky and peaceful options before approving a military operation. During the approval phase, President Carter made key decisions and sought peaceful options, which illustrates his high level of intervention during the approval phase of the operation.

Similarly, the Russian decision makers' involvement, especially that of President Vladimir Putin, in the approval phase of the Moscow Theater hostage taking was high. The negotiation process and attempts to gain international and domestic support took place with the approval of President Putin. He managed the situation and made the decision to conduct a military rescue mission.

The case studies indicate that the high risk and potential unanticipated consequences of special operations necessitate high-level involvement in the approval phase. In all four case studies, the level of decision makers' involvement in the approval phases of special operations was high and validates the first hypothesis.

## **B. HYPOTHESIS 2**

The second hypothesis is that the level of decision makers' control and involvement should be medium in the preparation phase of special operations. In the preparation phase of Operation Thunderbolt, first of all, the Israeli decision makers made their first appearance by choosing the right soldiers to plan and execute the operation. Afterward, the senior Israeli decision makers delegated this authority to the military decision makers. Senior military decision makers did the same thing by appointing General Shomron to plan and conduct the special operation. Furthermore, the Israeli decision makers were involved in the preparation phase only when the planners of the

operation needed their involvement. Examples of these situations were making the necessary coordination with other government agencies to provide the needs of the planners, continuing the negotiations to gain more time for the planners, and behaving appropriately to preserve the secrecy of the special operation.

In the preparation phase of Operation Nimrod, the first role of the British decision makers was to choose the best-trained soldiers to plan and the conduct the operation. After the approval of the special operation, they were involved as the preparation phase necessitated. For instance, they continued the negotiation process in order to gain necessary time for the planners to develop a detailed plan and to rehearse the rescue operation. Additionally, the COBRA was always ready to take care of the coordination needs of the planners. Apart from these actions, the British decision makers did not interfere in the preparation phase of the operation.

In comparison to Israeli and British decision makers, the Carter Administration's involvement in the preparation phase of Operation Eagle Claw was slightly more than necessary. Their involvement in the preparation phase affected decisions on the size of the rescue force and the number of helicopters needed for the mission. The gratuitous sense of urgency instilled by the President's Security Advisor was another example of the intervention of American decision makers. Furthermore, the American decision makers did not fulfill their roles during the preparation phase. They should have helped to coordinate between the planners and other governmental agencies. Additionally, military decision makers made a mistake by choosing U.S. Marine Corps helicopter pilots for the rescue mission. Their paranoia about the secrecy inhibited full rehearsals during the preparation phase. Considering the result of Operation Eagle Claw, it also shows that the decision makers should be involved in the preparation when the planners of the operation need their help.

Russian decision makers' involvement in the preparation phase of the operation, on the other hand, was insufficient; in other words, they did not appear to be involved based on the needs of the preparation phase. Russian decision makers also approved the continuation of the negotiation process to buy more time for planning like in previous case studies. However, the Russian decision makers did not fulfill their coordination role.

The lack of coordination between medical emergency providers and the rescue task force cost more than 100 Russian hostages' lives.

The case studies validate that the level of decision makers' involvement during the preparation phase of special operations should be medium as the second hypothesis proposes. In other words, the case studies suggest that senior decision makers should involve themselves in the preparation phase only if the planners need their help. It is also clear that when senior decision makers' involvement in the preparation phase is more than necessary, pressure on planners and task force personnel will be high, and that can negatively affect the planning efforts. Likewise, if the involvement is less than necessary, the planners will have a hard time getting their needs met.

### **C. HYPOTHESIS 3**

The third hypothesis says that the level of decision makers' control and involvement should be low in the execution phase of special operations. During the execution phase of the Operation Thunderbolt, for example, the presence of the senior Israeli decision makers was minimal. General Shomron moved with the tactical force, but he did not intervene. His only role was to report the updates to Tel-Aviv. The British decision makers also did not step into the execution phase of the Operation Nimrod. They only listened to the radio communications during the execution of the operation. Similarly, the Russian decision makers' involvement in the execution phase of the operation was very minimal.

During the Operation Eagle Claw, the American decision makers' presence was minimal as well during the execution phase. When Colonel Beckwith decided to abort the mission, National Security Advisor Brzezinski suggested asking Beckwith to reconsider the decision to abort and continue the mission with five rather than six helicopters. After receiving the same assessment from Beckwith, Carter approved aborting the mission. The unhelpful suggestion that Beckwith rethink the abort decision was the only intervention during the execution phase of the operation. It may have been the only intervention, but it was a significant and dangerous one.

All four case studies demonstrate that the level of decision makers' intervention in the execution phase of special operations should be minimal, as the third hypothesis advises. Their lack of tactical knowledge and their being removed from the area in which the special operation occurs make the presence of senior decision makers generally unhelpful, or even a hindrance, during the execution phase.

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## **IV. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

After examining the four case studies in Chapter II, I identified several roles and activities of senior decision makers during the three phases of a special operation. Some roles and activities are common in all four cases, but some roles are derived from a single case. The findings of the study, which are based on the facts presented in Chapter II, suggest that senior decision makers should perform very specific roles for successful special operations.

### **A. EXAMINING LESS RISKY OPTIONS**

The high-risk nature of special operations necessitates considering less risky options in order to solve an ongoing crisis. Senior-level decision makers should think carefully about other possible solutions before approving the execution of a special operation. A special operation failure may be devastating for a country's future or for the decision makers who approved the mission. The case studies provide important examples to validate the examination of less risky options. For instance, Israeli decision makers tried every possible solution before approving Operation Thunderbolt. Likewise, British decision makers initially tried less risky options and waited until the last minute to be sure that the hostages were clearly at risk during Operation Nimrod.

By contrast, American decision makers behaved differently during the hostage crisis in Iran in 1979. Initially, President Carter stated that a military option would be the last option. Yet, he did authorize the planning process. After six months of frustrating negotiations, President Carter approved the execution of the rescue operation. Even at that time, though, he should have continued to negotiate with the hostage takers and to put international pressure on the Iranian regime to minimize risk. When he approved the mission, the U.S. hostages were not in a life-threatening situation. The result of the failed mission contributed to Carter's failure to win re-election. Failure also negatively impacted the SOF community and the American people. Operation Eagle Claw is a great illustration of the importance of seeking less risky options, especially when the hostages are not in danger. Similarly, in the Moscow Theater hostage incident, the Russian

decision makers decided hastily to conduct the special operation. The hostage takers did not harm any hostages before the rescue mission started. Because of the Russian decision makers' eagerness to undertake the operation, hundreds of hostages were killed and injured during and after the rescue mission. Senior level decision makers should consider all less risky options before deciding to conduct a special operation in order to avoid unwanted consequences.

## **B. GAINING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT AND DOMESTIC SUPPORT**

Considering the possible undesirable results of a high-risk special operation, senior decision makers should attain domestic and—if possible—international support before authorizing a special operation. International support is crucially important in order to legitimize the action to the world. Furthermore, it puts more pressure on the target country or the terrorist organization to solve the crisis peacefully. However, attempts to gain international support may fail. In that case, it may compromise the operation, and increase the risk and likelihood of failure. On the other hand, domestic support is important for legitimacy. If the public is behind the operation despite its risk, the decision maker is on solid ground. Even if the operation fails, the population will understand. In addition, public support is also important for the SOF soldiers who conduct the operation. They know their country is behind them.

In Operation Thunderbolt, Israeli decision makers took several steps to gain international support to put more pressure on Idi Amin and the hostage takers. In the same manner, they also sought UN intervention to solve the crisis peacefully. Israeli decision makers' efforts did not solve the crisis peacefully, but contributed to legitimize the action to the world. Similarly, in Operation Eagle Claw, President Carter utilized the UN and its allies to put pressure on the new Iranian regime to solve the crisis peacefully. In the Moscow Theater incident, the Russian decision makers made several announcements that asserted the connection between the hostage takers and Al-Qaeda, to generate international support before the operation. All these attempts were made to gain international support and strengthen the decision makers' hand before conducting the operations.

Even though these attempts could not solve the crises in the case studies, they helped decision makers to legitimize their actions and accept the consequences. Therefore, senior level decision makers should work to gain international and domestic support during a crisis especially when a special operation is contemplated.

### **C. DELEGATING NECESSARY AUTHORITY**

Delegating authority is an important requirement for a successful special operation because it allows senior decision makers to get additional options from their subordinates. The delegation of authority is more important in the execution and preparation phases. If senior decision makers dominate these phases, attention will be diverted from proper planning and rehearsals.

In Operation Thunderbolt, Operation Nimrod, and the Moscow Theater hostage rescue, the decision makers delegated the necessary authority to the military experts during the preparation and the execution phases of the missions. By contrast, President Carter and National Security Advisor Brzezinski interfered during the preparation phase of Operation Eagle Claw. Carter was involved with determining the size of the rescue force. Carter's attitude might have forced the military planners to think that they had to keep the rescue task force smaller than was necessary for the operation. Likewise, Brzezinski's intervention caused the gratuitous feeling of urgency among the planners in the Pentagon. Both behaviors did not help during the preparation phase. They were an unnecessary diversion. Therefore, senior decision makers also should avoid making things more difficult for planners and practitioners of a special operation by delegating decision making authority to subordinate commanders. To conduct a successful special operation, senior decision makers should take advantage of their subordinates' expertise by delegating the necessary authority for preparation and execution.

### **D. ESTABLISHING A CLEAR CHAIN OF COMMAND**

Special operations require a clear and simple chain of command and control structure. The role of establishing a clear chain of command helps planners and prevents the confusion about command and control related issues. If everyone knows who is in charge and who is the person to ask for help, the process will become less complex.

During the preparation phase of Operation Eagle Claw, Major General Vaught and the planners experienced the problem related to the chain of command structure. Major General Philip G. Gast, U.S. Air Force, who served as a special consultant, was senior to Vaught. The planning personnel were confused about obeying orders coming from two generals. The unclear chain of command delayed the execution of orders and coordination efforts. Along the same line, an unclear chain of command at the Desert One location caused serious problems for the rescue task force in the execution phase of Operation Eagle Claw. Pilots did not follow orders until they clearly recognized the commander of the ground force and other officers. Consequently, a clear and recognizable chain of command eases the process of preparation and execution of a special operation. Senior decision makers should establish a clear chain of command at the beginning of the crisis. If the situation requires, they also need to update the structure to be able to conduct a successful special operation.

#### **E. SELECTING APPROPRIATE UNITS**

Complex and high-risk environments require specially trained and equipped units. Every special operation is unique. Selecting the appropriate unit in order to decrease the level of risk and increase the likelihood of success of a special operation is an important activity for senior military decision makers. In all four case studies, the decision makers selected their armed forces' best units to conduct the special operations. The Unit, the SAS, Delta Force, and the Spetsnaz were the best-trained counterterrorism forces of their respective nations' armed forces. Air force pilots in Operation Thunderbolt were the best pilots in the Israeli Air Force. However, the selection of marine helicopter pilots for Operation Eagle Claw by military decision makers was not appropriate. They were not trained to fly long distance at night, especially in a desert dust storm. A special operation task force should consist of fully trained personnel who have all the required capabilities for a mission. Consequently, senior decision makers should select the best units to plan and execute a special operation. Civilian decision makers should delegate the authority to select the appropriate units and personnel to leaders who know the level of training and the abilities of military units and the personnel in those units.

## **F. GAINING TIME**

More time means a better preparation process with a detailed plan for a special operation. The planners need the opportunity to examine the details of the operation several times before its execution, and they will also benefit from more intelligence as time passes. Additionally, the task force will have more chances to rehearse the mission to fine tune the execution. Buying time often falls on the decision maker. For instance, if these individuals manage the negotiations with hostage takers effectively, more time can be gained. The effort to gain time also aids the intelligence collection process. During the preparation phases of the case studies, the decision makers approved continuing negotiations to gain more time for planners. Therefore, one can conclude that if there is an opportunity to gain more time, senior decision makers should take the necessary steps to do so.

## **G. COORDINATING**

The preparation and execution phases of a special operation demand a successfully functioning coordination system. Senior decision makers should facilitate a functioning coordination system between the planners and the other governmental agencies. Otherwise, the planners cannot easily obtain what they need in time to properly prepare for a special operation. This point is illustrated in the case studies. During Operation Thunderbolt, Mossad quickly responded to the intelligence needs of the planners because of the effective coordination system among Israeli agencies. In a similar manner, the COBRA successfully performed the coordination role between the planners and other British agencies during Operation Nimrod. Coordinating with the airport authorities quickly is a great illustration. But, during the Operation Eagle Claw, it is hard to conclude that the American decision makers fulfilled the coordination role between the planners and other agencies. Getting intelligence from the CIA to the planners was not effective. Likewise, the Russian authorities failed to coordinate with medical personnel to provide emergency care to wounded hostages. Hence, the cost of insufficient coordination has massive consequences. Senior decision makers should establish a well-

organized coordination system between planners and other institutions and organizations for a successful special operation.

## **H.     PRESERVING SECRECY**

Secrecy is crucially important to create surprise during special operations. In some cases, senior decision makers can contribute to preserving the secrecy of a special operation. Operation Thunderbolt is a great example of preserving secrecy by senior decision makers. In an effort to promote an atmosphere of “business as usual,” some of the Israeli ministers participated in routine receptions, and General Gur went to the funeral of his father-in-law, which helped conceal the ongoing preparations from hostage takers or a suspicious public. Senior decision makers should help to preserve the secrecy of the special operation through their words and actions.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This chapter returns to the research question and provides an argument based on the hypotheses that were tested with the four case studies. The research question of the thesis is “What is the appropriate level of control and involvement of senior level decision makers during the approval, preparation, and execution phases of a special operation?” In order to answer the research question, I identified three hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the level of decision makers’ control and involvement should be high in the approval phase of a special operation. The second hypothesis is that the level of decision makers’ control and involvement should be medium in the preparation phase of a special operation. The third hypothesis is that the level of decision makers’ control and involvement should be low in the execution phase of a special operation.

To answer the research question, the hypotheses were tested on four special operation rescue missions. Results of testing cautiously answer the research question. Then, verified roles learned from the case studies can guide senior decision makers about their roles while directing the process of conducting short-duration direct action type of special operations.

### **A. SUMMARY OF THE STUDY AND THE FINDINGS**

Hypothesis 1 examines the level of decision makers’ control and involvement in the approval phase of a special operation. It asserts that the level of involvement should be high in the approval phase. In all four cases, senior decision makers’ involvement was high in the approval phases of the operations. In the approval phase of Operation Thunderbolt, the Israeli senior decision makers’ involvement was high. They had numerous meetings to find less risky solutions before approving the military operation. In Operation Nimrod, British decision makers were at the forefront during the approval phase of the operation. Similarly, the American decision makers were very active during the approval phase of Operation Eagle Claw. The Russian decision makers’ involvement, especially that of President Vladimir Putin, in the approval phase of the Moscow Theater hostage case was also high. In all four case studies, the level of decision makers’

involvement in the approval phases of special operations was high as the first hypothesis suggests.

Hypothesis 2 examines the level of decision makers' control and involvement in the preparation phase of a special operation. It suggests that the level of involvement should be medium in the preparation phase, which means decision makers should be involved when the process requires their attention. In the preparation phase of Operation Thunderbolt, the Israeli decision makers were involved when their involvement was required. During Operation Nimrod, British decision makers' involvement was medium as well. After approving the special operation, they were involved only as the preparation phase necessitated. In Operation Eagle Claw, in comparison to Israeli and British decision makers, the Carter Administration's involvement was slightly more than necessary in the preparation phase. This involvement contributed to some of the negative impacts mentioned in Chapter II. In the Moscow hostage crisis, Russian decision makers' involvement in the preparation phase of the operation was lower than necessary. Their lack of involvement contributed to the death of more than a hundred Russian hostages. Results from examining the case studies validate that the level of decision makers' involvement during the preparation phase of special operations should be medium as the second hypothesis proposes.

Hypothesis 3 examines the level of decision makers' control and involvement in the execution phase of a special operation. It suggests that the level of involvement should be lower than in the approval and preparation phases. During Operation Thunderbolt, the involvement of the senior Israeli decision makers was minimal in the execution phase. They did not intervene. The British decision makers also did not step into the execution phase of Operation Nimrod. Similarly, in the Moscow hostage crisis, Russian decision makers' involvement in the execution phase of the operation was very minimal. In Operation Eagle Claw, the American decision makers' involvement was minimal as well. When the abort decision was made, Brzezinski's suggestion that Beckwith reconsider the decision was the only intervention during the execution phase of the operation. All four case studies demonstrate that the level of decision makers'



intervention in the execution phase of a special operation should be minimal, as the third hypothesis advises.

The results of examining the case studies based on the hypotheses are shown in Table 1. According to the analysis, the decision makers' level of involvement during the approval phase of a special operation should be high. During the preparation phase, senior decision makers' involvement should be medium, which is also defined as being involved when the preparation process requires. Finally, senior decision makers should avoid interfering during the execution phase of special operations. Operation Thunderbolt and Operation Nimrod are two successful special operations. The decision makers behaved appropriately during the three phases of the special operations. In comparison, Operation Eagle Claw is a failed special operation in which the decision makers should have been more careful while directing the process. It is hard to claim that the Moscow Theater hostage rescue mission was successful. Even though all the terrorists were killed, more than a hundred hostages lost their lives during the operation and many more were injured. Russian decision makers' involvement was insufficient in the preparation phase of the operation. The result of the operation was mixed, neither a complete success nor a failure.

Table 1. Summary of the Results of the Case Studies

	<b>Phase/Level of Involvement</b>	<b>Operation Thunderbolt</b>	<b>Operation Nimrod</b>	<b>Operation Eagle Claw</b>	<b>Moscow Theater Crisis</b>
<b>Hypothesis 1</b>	<b>Approval Phase (High)</b>	High	High	High	High
<b>Hypothesis 2</b>	<b>Preparation Phase (Medium)</b>	Medium	Medium	High	Low
<b>Hypothesis 3</b>	<b>Execution Phase (Low)</b>	Low	Low	Low	Low
<b>Result</b>		Success	Success	Failure	Mixed

The study of the four special operations cases identifies certain roles and activities of decision makers in special operations as findings of this thesis. These specifically

suggested roles might guide decision makers while directing the process of conducting a special operation. The first identified role is to examine less risky options, which should be accomplished in the approval phase of a special operation. Decision makers should consider all less risky options to end the crisis peacefully before approving a special operation, which is very risky. The second identified role is to gain international and domestic support. The decision makers should carry out this task in the approval and preparation phases of a special operation. It may ease the tension and solve the crisis peacefully. The third identified role is to delegate authority as necessary. The decision makers should fulfill this role in all three phases of a special operation: approval, preparation, and execution. It may help them take advantage of their subordinates' skills. However, decision makers should be careful about delegating more authority than necessary otherwise they may lose control of the overall process. The fourth identified role is to establish a clear chain of command. The decision makers should fulfill this role in all three phases of a special operation. A clear chain of command helps the process function flawlessly. The fifth identified role is to select the appropriate units. The decision makers should fulfill this role in the approval and preparation phases of the operation. The sixth identified role is to gain time. The negotiations process not only seeks a possible peaceful, safe solution to a crisis, but also to gain time. The decision makers should perform this role in the approval and preparation phases of a special operation. Especially, in the preparation phase, time is crucial for the planners of the special operation. The seventh identified role is as coordinator. The decision makers should fulfill this role all three phases of a special operation. As the highest authority, the decision makers can easily solve the problems related to coordination. The last identified role is to preserve secrecy. The decision makers should fulfill this role in all three phases of the operation. It facilitates surprise in executing the special operation.

The identified roles of decision makers in special operations that emerge from the four cases studied are summarized in Table 2. These roles do not guarantee a successful special operation. However, based on the case studies, ignoring the identified roles might increase the risk of the operation, cause undesired consequences, put more pressure on planners and practitioners, and prevent the conduct of a successful special operation.

Table 2. Appropriate Roles of Decision Makers in Special Operations.

<b>Appropriate Roles of Decision Makers in Special Operations</b>	<b>Approval Phase</b>	<b>Preparation Phase</b>	<b>Execution Phase</b>
Examining Less Risky Options	+		
Gaining International and Domestic Support	+	+	
Delegating Necessary Authority	+	+	+
Establishing a Clear Chain of Command	+	+	+
Selecting Appropriate Units	+	+	
Gaining Time	+	+	
Coordination	+	+	+
Preserving Secrecy	+	+	+

## **B. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

Today, senior decision makers are facing more complex problems that require special operations to solve them. In this respect, Special Forces units take on more responsibility with each passing day because senior decision makers require Special Forces to resolve emerging problems. The implications of the findings can serve to guide senior decision makers while dealing with a crisis that requires a special operation for a solution. The suggested level of involvement and the roles that decision makers should perform during the approval, preparation, and execution phases of a special operation can guide senior decision makers in the progress.

## **C. AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This thesis has examined the level of decision maker involvement in three phases of a special operation in four well-known case studies. Considering the many special operations conducted before and after these four cases, the first area of further research might be to test the hypotheses in additional types of special operations, performed by different SOF units. The process of conducting a special operation changes depending on the type of the special operation. The roles of senior decision makers might be different

for protracted special operations. Therefore, examining more cases can provide additional evidence about the appropriate level of senior decision makers' intervention in different types of special operations.

The second area for future research involves testing the identified roles of decision makers in different cases. Some of the roles are derived from only one case; some of them are common in four cases. Thus, testing these roles for decision makers in additional cases can add valuable information to validate their roles.

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